Anthony Giddens The Consequences of Modernity

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Preface

This book essentially takes the form of an extended essay. I have divided it up into sections, rather than formal chapters, in order to develop the flow of the arguments in an uninterrupted fashion. The ideas expressed herein are directly bound up with my previous writings, and I have often made reference to these. I hope the reader will understand and forgive such frequent self-referencing, which is intended not as hubris but as a mode of providing backing for claims that cannot be exhaustively defended in a work of this brevity. The book began life in the shape of the Raymond Fred West Memorial Lectures, which I delivered at Stanford University, California, in April 1988. I am very grateful to my hosts at Stanford on that occasion, whose welcome and hospitality was wonderful. In particular, I am indebted to Grant Barnes, of Stanford University Press, who was instrumental in gaining me the invitation to give the lectures and without whom this work would not exist.

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What if this present were the world's last night? John Donne, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions

Imaginary time is indistinguishable from directions in space. If one can go north, one can turn around and head south; equally, if one can go forward in imaginary time, one ought to be able to turn around and go backward. This means that there can be no important difference between the forward and backward directions of imaginary time. On the other hand, when one looks at "real" time, there's a very big difference between the forward and backward directions, as we all know. Where does this difference between the past and the future come from? Why do we remember the past but not the future?

Stephen W. Hawking, A Brief History of Time

In March 1986, a nine-page article about the Chernobyl nuclear installation appeared in the English-language edition of Soviet Life, under the heading of 'Total Safety'. Only a month later, over the weekend of the 26–27 April, the world's worst nuclear accident—thus far—occurred at the plant.

James Bellini, High Tech Holocaust

in his History and Truth

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others. All meaning and every goal having disappeared, it becomes possible to wander through civilisations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes an imaginary museum: where shall we go this weekend—visit the Angkor ruins or take a stroll in Tivoli of Copenhagen?

Paul Ricoeur, "Civilisations and National Cultures,"



The Consequences of Modernity

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I

Introduction

In what follows I shall develop an institutional analysis of modernity with cultural and epistemological overtones. In so doing, I differ substantially from most current discussions, in which these emphases are reversed. What is modernity? As a first approximation, let us simply say the following: "modernity" refers to modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence. This associates modernity with a time period and with an initial geographical location, but for the moment leaves its major characteristics safely stowed away in a black box.

Today, in the late twentieth century, it is argued by many, we stand at the opening of a new era, to which the social sciences must respond and which is taking us beyond modernity itself. A dazzling variety of terms has been suggested to refer to this transition, a few of which refer positively to the emergence of a new type of social system (such as the "information society" or the "consumer society") but most of which suggest rather that a

preceding state of affairs is drawing to a close ("postmodernity," "post-modernism," "post-industrial society," "post-capitalism," and so forth). Some of the debates about these matters concentrate mainly upon institutional transformations, particularly those which propose that we are moving from a system based upon the manufacture of material goods to one concerned more centrally with information. More commonly, however, these controversies are focused largely upon issues of philosophy and epistemology. This is the characteristic outlook, for example, of the author who has been primarily responsible for popularising the notion of postmodernity, Jean-François Lyotard.1 As he represents it, post-modernity refers to a shift away from attempts to ground epistemology and from faith in humanly engineered progress. The condition of post-modernity is distinguished by an evaporating of the "grand narrative"the overarching "story line" by means of which we are placed in history as beings having a definite past and a predictable future. The post-modern outlook sees a plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge, in which science does not have a privileged place.

A standard response to the sort of ideas expressed by Lyotard is to seek to demonstrate that a coherent epistemology is possible—and that generalisable knowledge about social life and patterns of social development can be achieved.² But I want to take a different tack. The disorientation which expresses itself in the feeling that systematic knowledge about social organisation cannot be obtained, I shall argue, results primarily from the sense many of us have of being caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seems in large part

outside of our control. To analyse how this has come to be the case, it is not sufficient merely to invent new terms, like post-modernity and the rest. Instead, we have to look again at the nature of modernity itself which, for certain fairly specific reasons, has been poorly grasped in the social sciences hitherto. Rather than entering a period of post-modernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before. Beyond modernity, I shall claim, we can perceive the contours of a new and different order, which is "post-modern"; but this is quite distinct from what is at the moment called by many "post-modernity."

The views I shall develop have their point of origin in what I have elsewhere called a "discontinuist" interpretation of modern social development. By this I mean that modern social institutions are in some respects unique—distinct in form from all types of traditional order. Capturing the nature of the discontinuities involved, I shall argue, is a necessary preliminary to analysing what modernity actually is, as well as diagnosing its consequences for us in the present day.

My approach also demands a brief critical discussion of some of the dominant standpoints in sociology, as the discipline most integrally involved with the study of modern social life. Given their cultural and epistemological orientation, the debates about modernity and post-modernity for the most part have not confronted the shortcomings in established sociological positions. An interpretation concerned mainly with institutional analysis, however, as my discussion is, must do so.

Using these observations as a springboard, in the bulk

of this study I shall attempt to provide a fresh characterisation both of the nature of modernity and of the postmodern order which might emerge on the other side of the current era.

The Discontinuities of Modernity

The idea that human history is marked by certain "discontinuities" and does not have a smoothly developing form is of course a familiar one and has been stressed in most versions of Marxism. My use of the term has no particular connection with historical materialism, however, and is not directed at characterising human history as a whole. There undoubtedly are discontinuities at various phases of historical development—as, for example, at the points of transition between tribal societies and the emergence of agrarian states. I am not concerned with these. I wish instead to accentuate that particular discontinuity, or set of discontinuities, associated with the modern period.

The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion. In both their extensionality and their intensionality the transformations involved in modernity are more profound than most sorts of change characteristic of prior periods. On the extensional plane they have served to establish forms of social interconnection which span the globe; in intensional terms they have come to alter some of the most intimate and personal features of our day-to-day existence. Obviously there are continuities between the traditional and the modern, and neither is cut of whole cloth; it is well known how misleading it can be to contrast these two in

too gross a fashion. But the changes occurring over the past three or four centuries—a tiny period of historical time—have been so dramatic and so comprehensive in their impact that we get only limited assistance from our knowledge of prior periods of transition in trying to interpret them.

The long-standing influence of social evolutionism is one of the reasons why the discontinuist character of modernity has often not been fully appreciated. Even those theories which stress the importance of discontinuist transitions, like that of Marx, see human history as having an overall direction, governed by general dynamic principles. Evolutionary theories do indeed represent "grand narratives," although not necessarily ones which are teleologically inspired. According to evolutionism, "history" can be told in terms of a "story line" which imposes an orderly picture upon the jumble of human happenings. History "begins" with small, isolated cultures of hunters and gatherers, moves through the development of crop-growing and pastoral communities and from there to the formation of agrarian states, culminating in the emergence of modern societies in the West.

Displacing the evolutionary narrative, or deconstructing its story line, not only helps to clarify the task of analysing modernity, it also refocuses part of the debate about the so-called post-modern. History does not have the "totalised" form attributed to it by evolutionary conceptions—and evolutionism, in one version or another, has been far more influential in social thought than the teleological philosophies of history which Lyotard and others take as their prime objects of attack. Deconstructing social evolutionism means accepting that history can-