Modernities
This book is dedicated to

Holly, Colette and Christian
Modernities
A Geohistorical Interpretation

Peter J. Taylor

Polity Press
Contents

Preface ix

Prologue: Being Geohistorical 1

Who's modern? 4
Whose modern? 9

1 Modern, -ity, -ism, -ization 13

Ambiguous to the core 15
Social theory with smoke in its eyes 19
Multiple moderns versus multiple modernities 20
Modernizations of modernities 25

2 Prime Modernities 28

World hegemony as uneven social change 29
Three prime modernities 31
Two modernizations of modernities 35
Consensus and coercion in the projection of hegemonic power 38

3 Ordinary Modernity 44

Cultural celebrations of ordinariness 45
Feeling comfortable: the modern home 51
Contents

Suburbia: the domestic landscape of consumer modernity 56
Not modernism 59

4 Modern States 62

Inter-stateness 65
Absolutism as a political way of life 69
Going Dutch 72
The changing nature of territoriality 75

5 Political Movements 80

Parties and movements 82
Movements and modernities 85
Socialism against the modernity that Britain created 87
Environmentalism against the modernity that America created 90

6 Geographical Tensions 95

Where and what? 96
Place–space tensions 99
Nation-state as enabling place and dis-enabling space 100
Home-household as enabling place and dis-enabling space 106

7 Americanization 109

Incipient, capacious and resonant Americanizations 110
Inside America: conditions for constructing a modernity 115
Outside America: seeing the most modern of the modern 119
Americanization and globalization 123
Contents

Epilogue: Presents and Ends 125

System logic: the extraordinary effect of ordinary modernity 127
Political practice: the post-traditional challenge 130

References 135
Index 145
As a British resident, I will always remember 1997 as the year of the modern. In May a General Election landslide produced a New Labour government committed to modernizing Britain. It was led by people who called themselves modernizers. In August Diana, Princess of Wales, died and was immediately converted into a modern icon. Suddenly the words modern, modernity and modernization seemed to be on every news report. The Queen even complained about the world moving too fast, the time-honoured lament about living in a modern world. 1997 was a very modern year.

I had been thinking about modernity for some time before 1997. I began a project about world hegemony in 1990 and somewhere along the way this got interwoven with the concept of modernity. The result, in 1996, was *The Way the Modern World Works* (1996a), which some reviewers, tired of more about hegemony, had hoped contained rather more on modernity. In fact I only really begin to get to grips with modernity in the last chapter of the aforementioned book. This book builds upon *The Way* by restating the hegemony–modernity link (to make this book freestanding) but then takes it much further by adding some earlier work on modern politics and recent work and ideas on the ambiguity of modernization. In particular I use the book to promote what I term a geohistorical approach to social science as a reaction against some
of the more esoteric treatments of its subject matter. The latter, after all, consists largely of the everyday experience of ordinary men and women.

This is my first book since moving to Loughborough University. I am relishing being in a department with so many fine researchers all interested, in their different ways, in the cultural-political-historical-global mix of ideas that fascinate me. I would defy any human geography researcher not to enjoy the collective intellectual stimulation provided by a group such as Jon Beaverstock, Morag Bell, Ed Brown, Marcus Doel, Mike Heffernan, Sarah Holloway, David Slater and David Walker. In addition, outside the department, there are leading social scientists such as Michael Billig, Linda Hantrais, Ruth Lister, Mike Smith and Robert Walker. Loughborough is a very good environment in which to pursue social science.

At the same time that I moved to Loughborough I became a granddad, a much more important transition in life. This book is dedicated to three bairns for their lovely smiles and impish grins and everything which goes with both.

Peter Taylor
Do you think of yourself as being modern? The chances are you will not have to think too hard about this question; instinctively most readers would say 'yes, of course I am modern'. To be modern is perceived as being essentially positive, it is about 'moving with the times', being up to date, following the latest fashions or using the newest gadgets. For the whole of the twentieth century and for some time before, many, many millions of people have subscribed to the idea of being modern or have aspired to becoming modern. At times modern appears to be an all-pervasive identity, ubiquitous and therefore taken for granted and, if not yet universal, destined to become so. Modern is what we are.

The hold that the idea of being modern has on contemporary life can be appreciated by considering the use of the word modern as an adjective. In my teaching I ask students to fill in the blank in the following: 'modern ............'. The range of suggestions is always extraordinary in its breadth. As well as well-known items such as modern jazz and modern art, this word association exercise penetrates all realms of social activity: modern furniture, modern ideas, modern industry, modern science, modern medicine, modern transport, modern families, modern fashion, modern marriages, modern country, modern warfare, modern shopping centres, modern homes, modern farming, modern diseases, modern technology,
and the list goes on and on. In nearly all cases the word modern is being used to convey the idea that what is modern is better than what went before – Henri Lefebvre (1995, p. 185) calls it ‘a prestigious word’. Advertisers, and politicians, know this association only too well. Academics are not immune to the attractiveness of this seductively simple adjective either: in one bibliographic search for 1990 to 1997 I was able to find 5,057 items which had modern in their title. I should add immediately that I was not able to read all this work but I presume that in much of these writings modern was being used with its meaning taken for granted. That is to say, it was not interrogated as a concept or idea in the body of the text. So pervasive is this that it may even be the case in situations where such intellectual examination is the raison d'être of the publication. The Cassell Dictionary of Modern Politics (East and Joseph, 1994) is just such a case in point; there is no entry for modern. I guess the implication is that such an entry is unnecessary, everybody knows what modern is. Hence the book before you is redundant . . . er, well no, do not be too hasty, please read on.

Of course, there have been dissidents loath to accept this popular view of being modern. Whether self-ascribed as anti-modern, non-modern or post-modern, they have stepped back from the simple acceptance of the equation modern equals better to problematize what is so commonly accepted. The limiting case is Bruno Latour (1993), who doubts whether we have ever been modern. The latter is viewed as an artificial construct of modern disciplines ‘purifying’ in their discourses what have always been hybrid networks of social practices no different from the hybrid ‘pre-modern’ societies anthropologists write about. Although I accept that many such critiques have been immensely valuable by forcing us to view being modern in a new light, in this book I am writing from within rather than without the modern. In fact, from the geohistorical position I define below, I will argue that it is now impossible to write from outside the modern and therefore all such critiques are themselves inherently modern. This irony is made possible because one important feature of being modern is that it is a human condition which is especially inquiring about the world.

It follows that, despite its pervasive ‘given-ness’, there are still many examples of this investigative penchant being turned on the concept of modern from within. In such ‘internal’ critiques, being
Prologue: Being Geohistorical

modern is viewed, in Anthony Giddens’s (1990, p. 7) words, as ‘a double-edged phenomenon’. As well as the familiar triumphs of being modern, there is a downside. In the list using modern as an adjective above, there are modern warfare and modern diseases, which are hardly to be recommended. To argue that nuclear bombs are better than bows and arrows is to reveal a rather perverse sense of values. Obviously in any war situation modern weapons will prevail over past weaponry and are therefore ‘better’ but only in a very narrow sense. Unfortunately it seems that often the modern does define actions within a narrow instrumental mode of thinking which can easily lead to better at being bad. The Holocaust is the example where several aspects of being modern came together to create a horrific outcome. Although often interpreted as a primeval throwback to some past pre-modern condition, in reality this was a modern politics directing a modern bureaucracy which designed a modern organization combining modern transport, modern machinery and modern chemistry (Bauman, 1989). Evidently, modern has encompassed mass execution chambers as well as the latest designer clothes.

The purpose of this book is neither to celebrate nor to condemn being modern. Rather, I take a critical stance from a particular and, I think, undervalued perspective which I call geohistorical. The study of being modern in its various forms – I discuss modernity, modernism and modernization in chapter 1 – has been undertaken in many different ways from rather esoteric philosophical treatises to fairly humdrum abstracted empiricism which purports to measure being modern. All such studies may be considered as laying along a continuum with ahistorical-ageographical analyses at one end and geohistorical studies at the other. Studies at the pole opposite to my approach carefully delineate the meaning of modernity and then apply the definition as if it were independent of history and geography. For instance, Matthew Arnold in the 1860s outlined a timeless view of modernity by emphasizing particular intellectual and civic virtues focusing on a rationality he thought existed in Victorian England. Since he identified these same virtues in classical Athens, he designated the latter to be a modern society. Similarly, Baudelaire in the Paris of the 1850s, by focusing on the aesthetic, was able to argue that every age has its modernity represented by the painter capturing the fleeting and transitory in
his work. In complete contrast, here I take a much more grounded and concrete view of being and becoming modern. If being modern is a taken-for-granted feature of life this implies it is embedded in everyday thinking and behaviour. Such a condition I shall term modernity. A geohistorical approach respects this embeddedness, never neglecting the contexts in which modern behaviour and thinking take place. Quite simply, embedding occurs in real time and space locations which are constitutive of the modernity under study. Hence a geohistorical interpretation of modernity is concerned to understand the specific periods and places where ideas and practices of being modern are created, challenged and changed.

Most studies of being modern fall between these two poles. Periods and places of creation and reproduction of modernity remain part of the analysis but they are less central, often, for instance, being relegated to an illustrative role. At its worst this can lead to a relatively random ransacking of history and geography to find suitable examples to prove a point. Even in more sensitive arguments, for instance using case studies for comparative analyses, period and place may be brought back into the analysis as context but the wider time–space structure will still be missing. In a geohistorical approach periods and places are not simply ‘used’, they are interpreted as being the concrete face of modernity as a single interconnected story and map. It is this combined story-and-map which identifies a geohistorical methodology.

There can be many such geohistories, of course, and here I develop one particular version which produces a few surprises to counter some assumptions many of the more abstract studies take for granted. In this prologue both the universal pretensions of modernity and the beneficiaries of modernity are brought under the spotlight to provide a taster of such surprises. I use a phonetic play on words, first ‘who’s modern?’ and then ‘whose modern?’, to highlight the way in which a geohistorical approach forces certain questions to the fore.

**Who’s modern?**

Some years ago, the question ‘who is modern?’ was asked by A. Inkeles and D. H. Smith (1974) in a major study of modernization
in six third world countries. Arguing that development requires individuals to acquire the relevant attitudes and skills, to be 'modern man' (p. 5) as they term it, a standard sociological methodology was employed to answer the question. At the centre of the research was a questionnaire designed to measure the twelve personal qualities identified by the authors as making an individual effective in modern society. Surveying a large sample in each country, Inkeles and Smith were able to produce a score for every respondent on a 'composite scale' from 1 to 100. By aggregating these scores, the countries were ranked in terms of how rapidly they might become thoroughly modern like first world countries. Modernization studies such as this one have been properly criticized on many counts (see chapter 1), but they do raise an interesting question even if their answers are seen now as crude and simplistic.

Inkeles and Smith's study takes what I would call a liberal approach to defining modern. It is something individuals possess and therefore can be measured person by person. In the process every individual is abstracted out of her or his social context and tested by a universal measure. There is no sense of modernity as a geohistorical phenomenon, a network of opportunities and constraints which vary by time and place. Rather, an individual attribute is measured without reference to the necessary social support which makes being modern possible or indeed meaningful. If being modern is thought of in these more societal terms, it must be queried whether the idea of 'percentage modern' has any credence. I will take the view that being modern is one of those all-or-nothing conditions: either you are or you are not. In this book modernity is considered to be a condition experienced by people who live in a modern society; hence all such people are deemed to be modern by definition. Of course, this then begs the further question: what is a modern society?

Consider the following three people. It is the mid-eighteenth century and midway across the middle Atlantic a young African woman is in irons below deck in a slave ship. Captured in a minor war skirmish in her west African homeland she is destined, if she survives this journey, for Trinidad where she will be sold probably as a field hand in the sugar plantations. Moving on a century, it is the mid-nineteenth century and midway across central Ireland a small bedraggled family group is walking slowly in the direction of