IDENTITY AND MODERNITY IN LATIN AMERICA

JORGE LARRAIN
Identity and Modernity in Latin America
To Mercedes and Carolina
Identity and Modernity in Latin America

Jorge Larrain

Polity
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## 8. **Key Elements of Latin American Modernity and Identity**

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This book is about modernity and identity in Latin America, their trajectories and relationships. In themselves these concepts have well-established contents and meanings and are discussed in many currents of thought. This is why the first chapter will be devoted to a theoretical elucidation of these two concepts in a general way. But even mentioning these phenomena in relation to Latin America raises difficult questions. In what sense can anyone speak of a Latin American identity? Is one not assuming a common ground which does not exist among Latin American nations? Can one speak of modernity in Latin America? Is there a specific Latin American trajectory to modernity? What are the relationships between identity and modernity in Latin America? Is not modernity opposed to identity in Latin America?

In Latin America there has always existed a consciousness of Latin American identity, articulated alongside national identities. Much of this stems without doubt from a shared history during the three centuries of Spanish domination, the independence wars in which the criollos of several countries (descended from the Spanish conquerors) fought together, the language, religion and many other common social, economic and cultural factors. There are signs that consciousness about these common elements has been growing in Latin America in recent times. The existence of this Latin American consciousness is shown by four kinds of facts. First, most Latin American authors who have ever written about identity assume that there is a Latin American identity either by directly describing its characteristics or by analysing the identity of their own countries and
extending their affirmations to the rest of Latin America. It is a fact that Latin American authors frequently and with some ease go from the national to the Latin American, and conversely.

Second, this is not only true of social science essays that directly address the issue of identity, but in a different manner is also true of narrative, poetry, music and television’s *telenovelas* or soap operas. They have also made possible this general perception of a Latin American identity. In the literary field, for instance, many poets directly assume a Latin American perspective. Think for instance of Neruda’s *Canto General* and some of the poems of José Martí, Rubén Darío and César Vallejo. Fernando Ainsa has also mentioned the recurrence of archetypal towns in the contemporary Latin American novel such as Rumí in Ciro Alegría’s *El mundo es ancho y ajeno*, Macondo in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Comala in Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, El Valle in all the work of Adonias Filho, Santa María in the work of Juan Carlos Onetti, etc. These towns, even though they are all local, have become universally representative of the Latin American. They are mythical and telluric places, autarchic island-towns where the demarcation line between history and myth is diffuse, representing a golden age, a centre which in its isolation provides stability and happiness, a sense of identity.

Third, that this consciousness does not only belong to intellectuals and novelists but also to common people is shown by the marked enjoyment of each other’s music, novels, dance and soap operas. Most Latin American cultural practices have an important and widespread continental impact. Brazilian sambas, Colombian cumbias, Mexican corridos, Argentinian tangos and Cuban salsa are not only heard daily on the radio and danced in parties all over Latin America but they are also expressions with which Latin American people easily and spontaneously communicate. In television, the soap operas from Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Venezuela and Chile are exported and watched with enormous interest and relish everywhere in Latin America. This sense of a common identity was also shown by reactions to football matches in the 1998 World Cup. Although there was at first a fairly nationalistic frame of mind, as some Latin American national teams were eliminated allegiances switched to those which were still in competition. There was a spontaneous sense of Latin American solidarity which went well beyond any sense of a solidarity among Europeans. This is significant because more and more in Latin America the popular consciousness of national identity is mediated by football.

Fourth, it is also true that this sense of regional identity has been frequently imputed, whether we like it or not, from without, espe-
cially from Europe. From the sixteenth century onwards South America has been spoken of and discursively constructed in Europe as a more or less integrated whole, most of the time endowed with pejorative characteristics. This is true as much of European ‘scientific’ discourse as of the European popular imaginary. Thus a sense of the Latin American identity also emerges out of the elements shared by the Latin American nations as recognized and imputed to them by the European other. The access to these versions of identity and their internalization by the Latin American people was secured by three centuries of colonial domination.

I have come across only one Latin American author, Mario Sambarino, who puts forward the idea that there is no common cultural ethos between Latin American nations. For him there is no such thing as a Latin American being. The question of a ‘Latin American being’ – or a ‘national being’ for that matter – is a false problem because these are historically and culturally generated modes of living, which do not have and cannot have an ontological reality, a kind of immobile legality. Clearly Sambarino’s anti-essentialist conception of identity, which is to be praised because it is so rare in Latin America, leads him mistakenly to deny the possibility of a Latin American, or even a national, ‘imagined community’. It may be inadequate to look for a Latin American or national essence, but if there is a national, or a Latin American, historically variable and relatively common way of living, then one can speak of a national identity or a Latin American identity as a historically changing ‘cultural identity’.

It goes almost without saying that in Latin America there are also very strong national identities, which are mainly defined in relation to Latin American ‘others’, especially neighbouring countries. In this case differences are stressed more than similarities. Each national identity in Latin America has thus a Latin American common component and a specific one of its own. It is also possible to group some countries within Latin America as sharing more common features with one another than with the rest of the area, due to certain historical conditions, to their geographical location or to similar social factors. A good example would be the case of Argentina and Uruguay. Another one would be Peru and Bolivia. In this way it is possible to distinguish three or four groupings with different characteristics. For instance, Darcy Ribeiro has proposed a classification between ‘witness peoples’ (Mexico, Central America, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador), ‘new peoples’ (Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Caribbean nations, Chile and Paraguay) and ‘transplanted peoples’ (Uruguay and Argentina). Sambarino adopts a classification taken from Elman Service, which is similar to Darcy Ribeiro’s: ‘Indigenous America’
(Bolivia, Peru, Guatemala, Mexico), ‘“Mestiza” America’ (Paraguay, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Venezuela) and ‘European America’ (Uruguay, Argentina).5

In chapters 2 to 8, I shall mostly analyse the character and evolution of cultural elements common to all Latin America, along with a few relevant differences between some groups of countries. I shall do this by distinguishing certain historical stages. I shall not be able to study the peculiarities and differences of any national identity in particular, important as they are. Yet it should be borne in mind that in Latin America national identities and the regional Latin American identity, apart from each being a separate kind of collective ‘cultural identity’, are also closely linked. This is why in studying identity processes in Latin America, it is impossible to avoid a reference to this interplay between national identities and Latin American identity.

The theme of modernity in Latin America is full of historical paradoxes. Latin America was ‘discovered’ and colonized at the beginning of European modernity and thus became the ‘other’ of European modern identity. But Latin America was deliberately kept apart from the main processes of modernity by the colonial power. With the process of independence from Spain, Latin America enthusiastically embraced the Enlightenment’s ideas, but more in their formal, cultural and discursive horizon than in their political and economic institutional practice, where for a long time traditional and excluding structures were kept in place. When finally political and economic modernity began to be implemented in practice during the twentieth century, cultural doubts began to emerge as to whether Latin America could adequately modernize, or whether it was good to modernize by following European and North American patterns. While in practice modernizing processes were widened, disquieting questions arose as to whether they could be carried out in an authentic manner. Hence, it could be said that Latin America was born in modern times without being allowed to become modern; when it could become modern, it became so only in the realm of programmatic discourse; and when it began to be modern in practice, then doubts emerged as to whether this conspired against its identity.

This book will try to show how from the beginning of the nineteenth century modernity has been presented in Latin America as an alternative to identity, as much by those who have been suspicious of enlightened modernity as by those who badly wanted it at all cost. Examples of the latter are plentiful. Nineteenth-century Latin American positivism, for instance, believed that ‘order and progress’ could
be provided by the Enlightenment’s ideas, and precisely because of this, it strongly opposed the prevalent Indo-Iberian cultural identity. In the same way, the optimistic North American theories of modernization in the 1950s believed in an ineluctable transition to modernity through a series of stages, which would eventually overcome the traditional cultural pattern. In many contemporary neoliberal positions in Latin America the idea is implicit that the application of appropriate economic policies is a sufficient condition for an accelerated development which will lead Latin America to a modernity similar to the European or North American one.

But at the same time those who oppose enlightened modernity in the twentieth century do it because of what they see as Latin America’s true religious, Hispanic or Indian identity. For indigenistas, the true Latin American identity that modernity has destroyed has lain in the forgotten and oppressed Indian traditions since the conquest. For Hispanists, Latin America’s true identity can be found in the Spanish medieval cultural values that have been forgotten by the modernization processes since independence. For religious currents that emphasize the Christian or even Catholic nature of the Latin American ethos, the true identity has not been recognized by the enlightened Latin American elite, but can still be found in popular religiosity. All of them believe that Latin American identity was formed in the past once and for all, and that it was subsequently lost in the alienated pursuit of modernity. All of them believe that as long as modernity takes courses of action which go against the true Latin American identity, it cannot succeed and will lead to failure. Hence they propose that the only way out of this dilemma is to recover the lost essence of Latin America by going back to the Indian cultural matrix or to the values of medieval Hispanic culture or to Christian religion.

Between these two extremes are those like Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes and Claudio Véliz who, despite adhering to modernity, try to show how difficult the process of Latin American modernization has been because of the Spanish baroque legacy. For Fuentes ‘we are a continent in desperate search of its modernity’; for Paz, since the beginnings of the twentieth century we have been ‘totally installed in pseudo-modernity’, that is to say, for Paz Latin American modernity has never become really genuine. More recently Claudio Véliz has argued in a similar vein that Latin America’s stubborn baroque identity has been a major obstacle to its modernization and that only in the 1990s, bombarded by all sorts of consumer artefacts, did it begin to crumble and give way to an Anglo-Saxon kind of modernity.
Somehow the Latin American identity would have delayed the search for modernity, or would have allowed only a semblance of modernity to be reached.

It is interesting to verify that in spite of the many differences among these authors and currents of thought, and their favourable or unfavourable positions with respect to modernity, in all of them modernity is conceived as an eminently European phenomenon which can only be understood from the perspective of European experience and self-consciousness. Which means that it is supposed to be totally alien to Latin America and can only exist in the region in conflict with its true identity. Some oppose it for this reason and others want to impose it in spite of this reason, but both recognize the existence of a conflict that has to be resolved in favour of one or the other. Modernity and identity are polarized as phenomena with opposite roots.

Contrary to these absolutist theories which present modernity and identity in Latin America as mutually excluding phenomena, I would like to show their continuity and interconnection. The same historical process of identity construction is, from independence onwards, a process of the construction of modernity. It is true that modernity was born in Europe, but Europe does not monopolize its entire trajectory. Precisely because it is a globalizing phenomenon, modernity is actively and not passively incorporated, adapted and put in context in Latin America in most institutional and value dimensions. That there are important differences with Europe in these institutional and value processes there is no doubt. Latin America has a specific way of being in modernity. Latin American modernity is not exactly the same as European modernity; it is a mixture, a hybrid, a product of a process of mediation which has its own trajectory; it is neither purely endogenous nor entirely imposed from without, and some call it subordinate or peripheral.9

The objective of this book is to show historically how, within the context of some distinct stages, Latin America has been simultaneously constructing its cultural identity and modernizing, and the way in which these two phenomena, in spite of being intimately interconnected, are frequently perceived as opposite alternatives. It will also try to show historically in what respects the Latin American trajectory to modernity differs from or converges with other trajectories, in order finally to arrive at an idea of the specific elements of Latin America’s present modernity. In exploring historically the way in which identity and modernity have interacted in Latin America, I will also seek to explain why it is that, in spite of the fact that they are not mutually excluding phenomena, there has been such a marked
tendency to consider modernity as something external and opposed to Latin American identity.

At the root of this mistaken perception is the obvious fact that Latin American identity began to be constructed as long ago as 1492, three centuries prior to the first steps towards modernity, which started in earnest with the independence process at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This displacement of modernity with respect to identity could not but promote the idea either that modernity is a late and unwelcome graft on to an already constituted identity, or that identity is an obsolete and traditional obstacle to an indispensable modernization. Corresponding with these two positions, there are inadequate conceptions of both identity and modernity. Oversimplified conceptions of modernity totally conflate its different trajectories into a single European or North American model that has to be repeated. Essentialist conceptions of cultural identity freeze its contents and do not consider real cultural change. The former tend to hold that modernity requires getting rid of an identity that presents many obstacles to its progress. The latter tend to hold that identity must prevail against the encroachments of a foreign modernizing model.

My reading of Latin American cultural history is that an emphasis on oversimplified theories of modernity has alternated with an emphasis on essentialist conceptions of identity, loosely following the alternation of stages of economic expansion and stagnation or recession. Theories of modernization are more widely accepted at times of accelerated development and economic expansion. Theories of identity have emerged with greater force in periods of crisis or stagnation when rates of economic growth and general welfare stall or go down.

My idea is that in Latin America’s history there have been ‘roughly speaking’ six alternating stages, dealt with in chapters 2 to 7:

1. From 1492 to 1810, the colonial stage in which modernity was kept out.
2. From independence to 1900, the age of oligarchic modernity with important economic expansion.
3. From 1900 to 1950, the crisis of oligarchic modernity and beginnings of populist modernization. This is a long and difficult period with many crises and difficulties: two world wars, the Russian revolution and the major depression of the 1930s.
4. From 1950 to 1970, the postwar expansion.
5. From 1970 to 1990, the time of dictatorships, huge international debt and the ‘lost decade’ with negative growth.
From 1990 onwards, neoliberal modernization and economic expansion.

Now, the alternation between identity and modernity in Latin American history already suggests that questions about identity have not always had the same relevance. In fact questions about identity seem to disappear in situations of relative prosperity and stability. This is not only an empirical fact but there are also good reasons for this to be so. For identity to become an issue, a period of instability and crisis, a threat to old-established ways, seems to be required. As Kobena Mercer has put it, ‘identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.’ This does not mean that in times of stability identity stops being constructed; it only means that at such times very few people are consciously concerned with problems of identity – identity tends to be taken for granted.

Within the six stages that I have delineated there are four moments or periods of crisis when the issue of identity has acquired importance. Both the Indians and the Spanish undoubtedly raised the first questions about identity during the critical years of conquest and colonization. A second important moment when questions about identity re-emerged was the crisis of independence and the period of the constitution of the national states. A third critical period emerged in Latin America between 1914 and the 1930s: in the wake of the First World War and in the context of a huge international depression in the world capitalist system, the oligarchic rule of the Latin American landowners began to crumble and the newly mobilized middle classes and working classes came to challenge the old system. A fourth crucial period can be detected around the 1970s: the exhaustion of populist regimes, progressive industrial stagnation and the radicalism of the working classes led to a series of military coups in many countries. I shall explore cultural production at these moments with particular attention in order to ascertain the way in which the Latin American identity was constructed.

Most Latin American societies are not culturally unified and despite some central forms of integration and synthesis, which undoubtedly exist, cultural differences are still very important. These are more accentuated in countries with an important Indian and black ethnic component like Peru, Bolivia, Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil and Central America in general. In these plural societies there exists an enormous cultural diversity. But such cultural differences also exist, although to a lesser degree, in more homogeneous coun-
tries like Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. After independence, the new republics and their ruling classes tried very hard to construct not only a national state and a viable economy but also a sense of national identity. This national identity would respond to a national culture which had still to be constructed and which, it was hoped, would integrate the best elements and traditions of the existing ethnic cultures. But this, of course, was not a natural, spontaneous or ideologically neutral process. It was a very selective and excluding process, conducted from above, in which it was decided what to keep and what to ignore. This started with the adoption of Spanish as the national language (which means that many hundred Indian languages were condemned to second place or to extinction), but went on to cover many other cultural aspects including religion, art, etc.

Because of the original and persistent cultural heterogeneity, it can be argued that in most Latin American countries the state had to play a crucial role in the construction of national identities. It fell to the recently created Latin American states to create a sense of national unity and a national culture, in countries that after the independence wars were barely integrated. Hence to speak of national identities in Latin America is to speak of power relations, of ruling classes, which used the centralizing powers of the state and selectively decided what was going to count as national culture and what not. The history of Latin American national identities is closely interwoven with the interests of its ruling classes in their relationship with the state.

Any book on a collective identity, especially one that covers more or less half a continent, has to face some big methodological difficulties and decisions. A first important problem has to do with the kind of source material to be used in the analysis and the limits of the enterprise. Ideally, a complete book on Latin American identity should take into account all aspects of culture, that is to say both the more rigorous theoretical, scientific and artistic expressions of culture and the people’s whole range of modes of life, customs, values and forms of entertainment. There is no doubt that identity is influenced by and expressed through all aspects of life: art, film, economics, politics, media (television, radio, newspapers), popular religion, ways of life, novels, poetry, painting, popular art, etc. But obviously any single work cannot hope to be as comprehensive as that, not just because there will be fields in which the author will not have the necessary expertise, but also because to do justice to each domain would require more than the space available in a single book. In other words, it is inevitable that one has to make some choices and privilege what one hopes are the most representative areas.
There are, for instance, those who deal with Latin American cultural identity exclusively from the point of view of literature. Even more, one of them maintains that

it can be said without exaggeration that for the most part the Iberoamerican cultural identity has been defined by its narrative . . . Literary fiction has been able to go beyond any anthropology treatise or sociological study in the perception of reality. Statistical data and objective information are most of the time secondary in the face of what can be evoked by the power of images and the suggestions of a metaphor.12

This is a pretty widespread view in some intellectual quarters outside Latin America. Although it may be true that sometimes literature’s images and metaphors teach one more about a country or region than many sociological essays, I do not agree that identity in the Latin American case has been for the most part defined by literature. Literature is only one expression among others, although it is perfectly legitimate for a book to choose this angle as a way to study Latin American identity.

I have chosen a different path, probably determined by the fact that I am a sociologist. Basically, what my book does is to reconstruct the way in which the social sciences have directly dealt with the problem of identity and modernity in Latin America. I do not mean to exhaust the issue of identity or culture in Latin America, but only to trace the evolution of the complex relationship between identity and modernity as it has been seen and discussed by the Latin American social sciences. I understand social science in a wide sense, including essays and works of a philosophical, historical, sociological, political, economic and anthropological character. Although I believe this is a legitimate option, limited, but valid in itself, I have sought to enrich this approach with some secondary references to literature, religion and the role of the media in the various stages of Latin American development in order to present a more complete picture which includes at least some cultural practices. In so far as religion is concerned I shall not be concerned with Umbanda or Santeria, important as they may be, but with the main tendencies: Catholicism and the Pentecostal challenge because these have direct relevance for the issues of modernity and modernization in the area. I am conscious of the limitations of this effort. Still, although the social sciences, literature, religion and the media do not exhaust the cultural complexity of Latin America, I hope that by focusing on them I shall provide an account which will be representative and expressive of such complexity.
A second important problem has to do with the heterogeneity of Latin America, which not only includes many different nations of the Hispanic tradition, from the Caribbean to the extreme south, but also a giant country, Brazil, which belongs to the Portuguese tradition. Although the Hispanic and Portuguese traditions are not absolutely dissimilar, it is true that many works on Latin America have concentrated on Hispanic America and have tended to ignore Brazil – which, after all, is practically half the continent (constituting the eighth biggest economy in the world) and has an enormous cultural richness of its own. I consider Brazil an important part of Latin America, but the problematic of Latin American identity and modernity cannot be reduced to any single country, important as it may be. Yet obviously Brazil’s sheer weight and importance within Latin America warrants some kind of special treatment. I am no expert in Brazilian cultural and socioeconomic processes but I shall try to incorporate as much as possible and whenever possible some elements drawn from Brazilian literature and social sciences. This, I am sure, will not be enough, but is more than I shall do for any other specific country of the Hispanic tradition.
Prior to studying the issues of modernity and identity in Latin America it is necessary to clarify, if only very briefly, some theoretical aspects related to these concepts in order for the reader to know what I shall understand by them and where I stand in relation to conflicting theoretical traditions.

**Dimensions of modernity**

Modernity is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, which requires to be studied from a variety of angles. Although the first writings showing an awareness of modernity as something new appear fairly early in the work of Machiavelli, Bacon and Descartes, the idea of modernity was given a decisive formulation in the discourse of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The emergence of modernity is thus associated with a particular time (the eighteenth century) and a particular geographical place (Europe). The philosophical discourse of the Enlightenment understood modernity on the basis of key ideas such as freedom, tolerance, science, progress and reason, and in opposition to metaphysics, superstition and religion.

The ideas of freedom and individual autonomy at all levels were particularly important. When Kant wanted to define what Enlightenment was about, he asserted that it was basically related to autonomy of thought, ‘to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another’. For Hegel, too, freedom and subjectivity were
the very foundation of modernity and for this reason he could say, ‘the principle of the modern world is the freedom of subjectivity’. Freedom appears as the basic and inalienable human right. At the economic level it means the possibility of pursuing one’s own interests within a free market; at the political level it means the possibility for each individual to participate with equal rights in the formation of the political will; in the private sphere it implies ethical autonomy and the possibility of self-realization.

However, as Wagner warns, this emphasis on subjective freedom is accompanied and virtually constrained by the recognition that there are also collective ends, common objectives and values that exist prior to individuals, that should limit individual freedoms. This is the source of the ambiguity that surrounds modernity. And this very ambiguity has sometimes allowed very unilateral interpretations of modernity. Touraine, for example, has argued that for a long time modernity was defined fundamentally as a function of instrumental reason, science and technology, and that this other dimension of subjectivity, freedom and creativity has been concealed and subordinated in spite of being half of a complete idea of modernity. Hence the objective of his critique is to ‘delink modernity from a historical tradition that has reduced it to rationalization, and introduce the theme of the personal subject and subjectivity’.

The ideas of freedom, tolerance, science, progress and reason were also crucial to Marx, Weber and Durkheim, who contributed to the foundation of sociology in the late nineteenth century. Their theories could be said to be important attempts at understanding modernity. Each of them underlined a different angle of modernity. For Marx, what was at the basis of modernity was the emergence of capitalism and the revolutionary bourgeoisie, which led to an unprecedented expansion of productive forces and to the creation of the world market. Durkheim tackled modernity from a different angle by following the ideas of Saint-Simon about the industrial system. Although the starting point is the same as in Marx, feudal society, Durkheim emphasizes far less the rising of the bourgeoisie as a new revolutionary class and very seldom refers to capitalism as the new mode of production implemented by it. The fundamental impulse to modernity is rather industrialism accompanied by the new scientific forces. In the work of Max Weber, modernity is closely associated with the processes of rationalization and disenchantment of the world. These processes entail that

there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This
means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed.\textsuperscript{7}

Each one of these three sociological versions contributes an insight into crucial aspects of modernity, thus confirming its multidimensional character. But there is more. Modernity could also be understood as a form of self-consciousness, as a specific mode of life and as a vital experience. As a form of self-consciousness it expresses the consciousness of an epoch which considered itself new \textit{vis-à-vis} an obscure and stagnant past. According to Habermas, Hegel was the first philosopher who developed a clear concept of modernity precisely because he spoke of it, in a historical context, as a new age.\textsuperscript{8} Modernity does not respect its own past and regards itself as the result of a transition from the traditional to the new. Benjamin too defined modernity as ‘the new in the context of what has always been there’, as a discontinuity of experience which is related to the past.\textsuperscript{9} This novelty is related to a powerful feeling of self-confidence and superiority in respect of both its past and other societies which are considered to be backward. According to Bauman, this faith in its own principles and in the superiority of its own mode of life has led the European intellectual elite to considering European modernity as the point of reference for the interpretation of history, as the measure of other forms of life which appear immature, incomplete, underdeveloped or inferior.\textsuperscript{10}

This feeling of superiority in respect of backward societies is not merely the result of a casual or \textit{ex post facto} comparison, but is connected with the way in which modernity itself was born. It is precisely when Europe ‘discovers’ America that it can affirm itself as the centre of world history. America was the first periphery of modern Europe. As Dussel has put it, ‘modernity as such was “born” when Europe was in a position to pose itself against an other, when, in other words, Europe could constitute itself as a unified ego exploring, conquering, colonizing an alterity that gave back its image of itself.’\textsuperscript{11} The discovery and conquest of America is therefore ‘a part of the process of the constitution of modern subjectivity itself’.\textsuperscript{12}

Yet modernity’s self-consciousness was not acquired in one go and has evolved historically. Berman has distinguished three phases in the history of modernity.\textsuperscript{13} From the beginning of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century the levels of consciousness are low. The first writings which show some consciousness about modernity are still struggling to find the appropriate language to express the new reality, which they do not fully understand. The second
phase, starting with the revolutionary wave of the end of the eighteenth century, spans the whole of the nineteenth century. In this period the European public shares the experience of living in a new and revolutionary epoch. The very idea of modernity receives its definitive formulation with the enlightened discourse of the eighteenth century, which highlights the new ideas of science, progress and reason. The third phase, in the twentieth century, witnesses the expansion of the modernizing processes all over the world, with the consequent development of a universal consciousness about modernity.

Another dimension of modernity has been explored by Giddens, who has argued that ‘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.’ These modes of life combine democracy with industrialism, general education with a mass culture, world markets with big bureaucratic organizations. They are characterized by their accelerated pace of change, by their globalizing tendencies, by their reflexivity and by their new institutions. Giddens argues that modernity is separated from the past by three main discontinuities: first, the accelerated pace of change which characterizes modern societies; second, the wide scope of change processes which become global; and third, the intrinsic nature of modern institutions which cannot be found in the past.

To these three discontinuities mentioned by Giddens I would add a more fundamental philosophical one: modernity made the human being the centre of the world, the measure of all things, as against the old theocentric worldview which prevailed in medieval times. The human being becomes ‘the subject’: the basis of all knowledge, the master of all things, the necessary point of reference for all that goes on. The world ceases to be an order created by God and becomes ‘nature’, with its own autonomous logic which the subject must know in order to use it.

I think it is important to understand that all these areas of discontinuity manifested in new and specific modern institutions and social practices were not created overnight and established in a sweeping general process on all fronts at once. Wagner has quite appropriately distinguished between the project of modernity as expressed in the organized discourse of philosophers, which constructs a true imaginary of modernity, and the social practices and modern institutions which each society has really managed to implement and develop. The discourse of modernity has always been more advanced and complete than the actual social practice and institu-
tionalization of modernity in concrete societies. As Wagner puts it, “modernity”, so to speak, had very few citizens by 1800, not many by 1900, and still today it is hardly the right word to characterize many current practices.

Modernity is also a vital experience. This aspect has been highlighted in contemporary times by Marshall Berman, David Frisby and David Harvey, but its origins can be traced back both to Baudelaire and Simmel. In his famous essay of 1863, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, Baudelaire stated that ‘by “modernity” I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.’ Simmel, in his turn, very much insisted on the idea of modernity as a vital experience that privileged the inner feelings of individuals in the face of a complex and changing world. This is why Simmel could define the essence of modernity as ‘psychologism, the experiencing and interpretation of the world in terms of the reactions of our inner life, and indeed as an inner world’. But this new kind of subjectivism is not purely positive; it is also a kind of retreat from the tensions that characterize modern life. In analysing two of the most important sites of modernity – the advanced money economy and the metropolis – he detects ‘the increase in nervousness and the preponderance of an inner world as a retreat from excessive external stimuli’.

The emergence of modernity is thus associated with an experience of mobility and social change, with a sense of dynamism; it expresses an overwhelming sense of ephemerality, fragmentation, contingency and chaotic change. Modernity not only breaks abruptly with the past but is also characterized by a permanent process of internal ruptures and fragmentation. On the other hand, modernity nevertheless finds in reason and science a sense of the universal and necessary. The simultaneous emphasis on change and science is manifested in what García Canclini calls the renovating project of modernity: ‘the pursuit of incessant innovation and improvement typical of a relation with nature and society which is free from all sacred prescription as to how the world should be’.

The vital experience of ephemerality and contingency becomes acute in times of more accelerated change and crisis, to such an extent that reality may be experienced as chaotic and feelings of disorientation and fragmentation can overwhelm individuals. These feelings, fruits of the exacerbation and radicalization of the vital experience of modernity, have led some contemporary authors to put forward the idea that modernity is at an end and is being replaced by postmodernity. At first, though, they merely contributed to a more critical appraisal of the process of change without sight being lost of its