

Modernity

Concept: Modernity

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Description Modernity is a broad and frequently debated term used to describe the history of Western European countries from roughly the early-seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth century. In general, modernity's signature features include increased urbanization, a shift from feudal economies to industrial capitalism, and a departure from the authority and constraints of ancient traditions and religious beliefs towards an embracing of scientific and philosophical rationalism, liberalism, and egalitarianism. Modernity is thus associated with technological and economic transitions as well as their attendant, and just as profound, shifts in consciousness. Especially crucial to these shifts is the emergence of the individual as a figure of significant cultural and economic influence.

Raymond Williams (1988), who has charted the development of the word "modern" from its early French and Latin roots, notes that up until the nineteenth century most uses of the word in English were comparative (modern versus traditional) and unfavourable. Williams stresses that it was not until the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century that the term modern became virtually synonymous with "improved." This genealogy demonstrates how our current sense of the word modern and, by extension, the word modernity, is directly tied to an ideology of (or deep faith in) progress — a kind of cultural valorization of newness and efficiency.

Contemporary popular discourse thus regularly presents modernity as being positively defined by its association with technology. Modern Western capitalism is similarly presented as a "natural" system of progressive social organization. There are certainly many apparently undeniable benefits of modernity (at least for those in the so-called First World) including: greater life expectancy, higher standards of living, the institution of public education, and the legislation of civil liberties for groups marginalized by gender, sexuality, race, and ability.

In an everyday context, however, we also encounter modernity invoked in a strikingly negative fashion. The most common popular critique articulates a general sense that modern culture, and particularly modern consumer culture, encourages conformity and passivity. And indeed cultural theorists — from the right and the left of the political spectrum — have argued that modernity corresponds to subtle social and individual challenges and deprivations, including: the general homogenization of culture; the alienation of urban living and routinized work; the erosion of local communities and social support networks; and the lack of a clear

alternative to failing religions. Liberal and conservative groups also have their own, particular concerns about modernity. Activists from the political right (from fundamentalist religious groups to pro-censorship lobbies), for instance, argue that modernity's erasure of tradition has led to the waning of moral civilization. On the other hand, social justice movements (from environmentalists to feminists) of the political left criticize modernity for being ecologically and socially negligent.

This leftist view of modernity has been informed by, and itself informs, enduring academic debates in the disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. Cultural theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Marshall Berman, for example, take a critical view of the connections between the rise of modernity and the rise of industrialization, capitalism, and imperialism/colonialism. According to this Marxist or "cultural materialist" perspective, key components of modernity, such as the growth of private enterprise and the expansion of the middle classes, are dependent upon disturbing and far-ranging human exploitation. In addition, it has been pointed out by ecologists and environmental scholars that modernity's dependence upon and veneration of technology has led to the unceasing degradation of the environment, as well as to the development and deployment of apocalyptic nuclear weapons. These concerns are popularly articulated in counter-cultural and protest movements from the hippie culture of the 1960s to the current antiglobalization protests.

Marxist, feminist, and post-colonial/globalization critics — whether academic or grassroots — have also argued that modernity's celebration of the rational, independent individual in fact represents the privileging of a particularly white, male, European, and upper-class subject. Rather than being residual aspects of older forms of social organization, inequalities of gender, race, and class are viewed by these groups as fundamental characteristics of the social and economic foundations of modernity. For these critics, legislative "equality" thus fails to address the entrenched, systemic nature of discriminatory practices.

But even within the academic context there are those who continue to have faith in modernity. For influential philosopher Jurgen Habermas, for example, the principles and legacy of the enlightenment project of modernity hold abundant ethical promise — and Habermas remains confident that rational human communication may eventually revise power imbalances in the contemporary public sphere. Sociologist Rose Coser echoes Habermas's optimism and is especially hopeful about the social, liberating force of modernity. She believes that "traditional" societal systems (the patriarchal family, for instance) work to undermine the integral autonomy or independence of individuals, especially women. Consequently, she argues that modernity — with all of its rich opportunities for personal choice and intellectual investigation — nourishes cultural differentiation and even personal freedom.

While "modernity" would seem to be the most obvious of words — a simple

noun referring to the current temporal and cultural condition in Western societies — its meaning and implications are thus the subject of serious deliberation in both the academic and popular settings. But whether they are staunch critics or optimistic advocates of its manifest structures and ideologies, most cultural theorists and social activists share a commitment to investigating modernity's promise of social equality, liberation, and redress. The positive or negative evaluation of how successfully these ethical goals have been furthered over the last half-millennium will necessarily affect the nature and methodology of the continued struggle to realize an equitable global community.

Work Cited: **Williams, Raymond.** 1988. *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. Hammersmith, London: Fontana P.

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