

Modernity: The Fundamental Characteristics

Modernity refers to a period of time, typically the 18th and early 19th centuries, which saw a vast number of people leave simple self sufficient farming lives in order to live in cities and work for wages. The rise of capitalism is one of the hallmarks of modernity, ; this is accompanied by a number of incredible achievements in science and technology that allow for the rise of wide scale industrialization. Along with the rise of science comes a new way for humans to understand life, there is a new respect for the principle of reason, and a decline in the number of people who follow any of the worlds religions. There are new sciences which view human subjectivity as the foundation for knowledge, and a new notion of individualism which encourages you to go out and learn who you are and be true to yourself. ¹

Human societies since we had records have always had a way of placing themselves in the cosmos or time, we understand ourselves in terms of some large scale narrative. Philosopher and economist Adam Smith said human history could be understood in stages, according to the way humans made their means to life. The 1st stage was the age of hunters, the 2nd was the age of shepherds, 3rd the age of agriculture, and finally 4th the age of commerce. ² The differences in these stages produced different cultures; in the age of agriculture, you could conquer your

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernity>

² <http://www.iep.utm.edu/smith/>

neighbors or prevent them from conquering you if you went to war, it was productive. This is one of the reasons war was an enduring feature of antiquity.

With the rise of commerce comes a new type of society. A commercial society puts a strong emphasis on production and exchange of goods, for which peace is an absolute condition. War is very bad for business, and so we see a different society with different values. The rise of commerce can be thought to be a great advance on 2 grounds. You begin to see the advantage of continuous growth, not intermittent famine, something not possible before. There is continuing progress. The 2nd ground is on the human level. Most would agree that making peaceful production and exchange our top goal is much better than making war our top goal. With this exchange comes a great intercourse of people of different cultures, more people begin to feel comfortable not only in their own town or village or country. There is a universal ethics of commerce, in which the exchange of goods is more important than military supremacy.

The rise of commerce was dependent on the development of new technology, which would not be possible without the substantial gains in science made during the period of modernity. Among some of the great thinkers of the time were James Maxwell, who invented the theory of magnetism which allowed for the creation of all sorts of new electric technology. Einstein's mass energy equivalence formula, $E=mc^2$, had astounding implications for science and helped us to understand the

birth of the universe, as well as allowed for the creation of new technologies such as x-rays.³ Edwin Hubble's discovery that the further away from earth the faster a galaxy recedes showed that the universe is expanding, which led credence to the Big Bang theory that had been proposed in 1927.⁴ With these discoveries humans began to have a better understanding of their place in the universe.

With modernity came a decline of faith and people practicing religion, and the church ceasing to dominate the public sphere. Modernity drives out religious faith because it brings in its wake science, and many believe science will show that religious faith has no foundation, and there will come a point where no one will have any motivation to believe anymore. With modernity comes a mode of identity in which the possibility of not believing in a faith is a viable option. For much of history the church was so interwoven in society that not practicing faith was not an option for many. Modernity brings new options to finding ones way in life.

With industrialization comes a new way of living and a new attitude toward nature, no longer are we dependent on nature, it is something to be subdued and controlled. The move towards rationalization means the replacement of traditions, values, and emotions as motivators for behavior in society with rational, calculated ones.⁵ Advances in communication and transportation technologies meant that

³ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/physics/legacy-of-e-equals-mc2.html>

⁴ <http://www.space.com/15665-edwin-powell-hubble.html>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rationalization_%28sociology%29

more and more people were traveling to new places and connecting with more and different people.

With industry came urbanization, the movement of people from rural parts into urban cities. This change in the way we live is a characteristic of rationalization, which seeks to ever increase efficiency. With an overall increase in affluence, there is a trend in society towards caring for higher order needs, rather than just the physiological ones (food, water, health). There is an overall increase in education levels as more people see the benefits of having an educated society, and more is done to provide access to education for the many than ever before. The printing press has made the mass production of books possible and knowledge is being dispersed like never before.

Advances in transportation and telecommunication have made the world more accessible than ever, no longer is it necessary to travel weeks or months to get to far away locations. Rail travel especially has made relatively quick long distance travel a reality, in a sense turning the world into one immense city. The German philosopher and economist Karl Marx predicted the expansion of commerce leading the wealthy capitalists to “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, and establish connections everywhere”. The machine of industrial capitalism would lead to “intercourse in every direction, and universal interdependence of nations”.⁶ With

⁶ Marx, Karl, 1848, “Communist Manifesto,” in Robert Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York: Norton, 1979.

modernity no longer was there a narrow concern for ones own area or region, but a move towards national and international unity.

The late 19th century was a turbulent time in Europe, with the advance of rationalization came a new wave of people demanding an end to absolute monarchy and the beginning of democratic reform. The new notion of subjectivism emerged from the breakdown of traditional values, customs, and institutions at this time. With it came widespread feeling of alienation, and a loss of meaning for many, this resulted in the construction of new kinds of identity, or what it means to be human. Many existentialist philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Frederich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre begin writing at this time, they believed that philosophical thinking begins with the human subject, not just the thinking subject but the acting, feeling, living human individual.⁷

With modernity came a new notion of individualism, and a new understanding of what the human good is, what the excellences are and what we should aim at. In a commercial society people want the freedom to be independent and to act the way they want to act, this is the new idea of liberty. There is a new conception of the free individual as a responsible agent seeking his or her own authenticity. The modern individual owes it to themselves to go out and discover their true identity and to act it out, no longer is it acceptable to just accept and adapt to the social models given by ones parents, society, or environment.

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existentialist>

