
Modernity: A Different Time

*A universe in pieces, abandoned, without hope, an image of the real
... Everything has taken on the miraculous tint of time.*

Louis Aragon

Two fundamental assumptions underlie, and vitiate, most of the writing about 'modernity' in recent debates about historical periodization and cultural change. One is that the term can be used unproblematically to refer to some chronologically distinct span of historical time, marked out by epochal changes in the structure of European societies – whatever the precise limits of such a time-span are taken to be. The other is that the question of the forms of time-consciousness produced within European societies during this period can be separated off from the question of the temporality of periodization itself. 'Modernity' is routinely assumed to be an empirical category of historical sociology, used to register certain inaugural breaks or ruptures in the development of societies, at a number of different levels – from political, economic and legal forms, through religious and cultural organization, to the structure of the family, the relations between sexes, and the psychological constitution of the individual – within the underlying unity of a 'period'.¹ The forms of temporality with which these various domains are associated are rarely connected to the temporality implicit in, or proper to, the use of modernity as a periodizing category. Indeed, the idea of modernization, through which the sociological concept of modernity was extended beyond its original reference to European and North American societies, in the context of the processes of post-war decolonization, notoriously presumes a homogeneous continuum of historical time across which comparative judgements about social development may be made in abstraction from all qualitative temporal differences.

These assumptions served sociology well for the best part of a century, insofar as they allowed it to constitute its object as a discipline

(‘modern’ societies) in a way which simultaneously distinguished it from history and anthropology, on the one hand, and journalism, on the other, while nonetheless retaining its links to the concerns of all three (‘the past’, “‘other” societies’ and ‘the present day’, respectively), in the spirit of an empirical objectivity. However, the problematic character of these assumptions comes into view as soon as the issue of *change within the present* is raised otherwise than as an extrapolation of developmental tendencies built into the relationship between pre-given structural social types (‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’); that is to say, as soon as the present is viewed, however briefly, from the practical perspective of the radical openness of the historical process. This challenge to the sociological concept of modernity has taken two main forms: first, during the period of the formation of sociology as a discipline, from the theoretical and political alternative of Marxism; and second, more recently, through the more theoretically and politically diffuse, but no less strident, claims that have been made on behalf of the idea of postmodernity. Each disrupts the complacency of the sociological category of modernity in a different way.²

Marxism contests the bifurcation of history into ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies through a periodization based on the idea of modes of production: historically distinct combinations of social relations and material forces of production that are understood to condition ‘the general process of social, political and intellectual life’.³ And it locates itself, practically, within this history through its identification with those social forces internal to the capitalist mode of production which it takes to represent the principle of a new system of production, in which the contradictory class dynamics of hitherto existing societies will be abolished through the abolition of economically based social classes (communism). From this perspective, the idea of modernity may be understood in two very different ways. Either it is short-hand for the most ‘advanced’ social forms at any particular historical moment (the forms of ‘today’), judged by the criterion of their contribution to the development of the productive forces on a world-historical scale; or, in its sociological sense, it is an ideological term which masks significant differences between societies by attending only to certain superficial features they have in common.

In the first case, the term acquires a new social content by being situated within the developmental perspective of historical materialism. Marx himself often used ‘modern’ in this way, to refer to particular features of industrial capitalism: ‘modern manufacture’, for example, and ‘modern industry’.⁴ In the latter instance, it is more profoundly problematized. However, a crucial question remains. This is whether

the relocation of the sociological concept of modernity within the developmental perspective of historical materialism affects its temporal structure as a category of historical periodization, or whether it just gives it a new, changing historical content. Is there a new conception of historical time implicit in the developmental perspective of a materialist conception of history? Or does it, like the sociology of modernity, take the homogeneous character of historical time for granted by the manner in which it makes comparative judgements between modes of production? The first position is shared by Benjamin, Sartre and Althusser; the latter is taken by Kracauer, who insists that Marx, like Comte, 'unquestioningly confide[s] in the magic of chronology'.⁵ However, the difference is smaller than one might think, since all of the former agree both that the new materialist conception lacks self-consciousness, and that the Marxist tradition has tended to regress behind it in the most prevalent forms of its practical consciousness (stemming from the period of the Second International). As Sartre put it: 'Marxism caught a glimpse of true temporality when it criticised and destroyed the bourgeois notion of "progress" . . . But – without ever having said so – . . . renounced these studies and preferred to make use of "progress" again for its own benefit.'⁶ Furthermore, when each of them came to develop their own version of the 'true temporality' of history, implicit in Marx's work, they turned out to be very different indeed.

The situation regarding the idea of postmodernity is rather different. It problematizes the category of modernity, neither by giving it a new content (by locating it within a different theory of history), nor by questioning its ideological function, but rather by proposing that certain societies have experienced (and are experiencing) transformations of a sufficiently radical kind to distinguish them from those social forms hitherto taken to define what is modern, to the extent of justifying their description as 'postmodern'.⁷ This would seem to offer far less of a challenge to the sociological concept of modernity than Marxism, since it not only fails to contest its terms, theoretically, but actually accepts them, insofar as it defines itself through its relation to the periodizing concept of modernity, by simple temporal negation (the logic of the 'post'). Indeed, after a brief initial period in which the idea of the post-modern looked like a further, if not final, threat to a disintegrating discipline (sociology), it has since proved to be excellent cover for a return to classical sociological theorizing in a new, terminologically transformed and less empirically oriented guise. Once the 'modern' becomes 'tradition', the 'postmodern' can play the modern, and the temporal structure of the orthodox sociological concept of modernity

can be redeployed across the new field. At the same time, simple slippages between usages can generate exciting new paradoxes. Thus, 'postmodernity' can appear as the product of both 'de-traditionalization' and 're-traditionalization' simultaneously, without the glimmer of a dialectic, if the reference of 'tradition' is allowed to oscillate between different uses of 'the modern'.

On closer examination, however, the idea of postmodernity turns out to have rather more subversive potential, once we set aside its relations to the *content* of the sociological concept of modernity, and reflect upon the way in which the term 'modernity' is dependent for its meaning on identification with some specific present. For if the primary, root sense of 'modernity', prior to its theoretical elaboration or the attribution to it of any particular historical content, is 'the quality or character of being modern'; and if the modern, in its primary sense, is simply that 'pertaining to the present and recent times', or 'originating in the current age or period',⁸ then, paradoxically, 'postmodernity' must be the name for a new modernity. Once we reflect upon this theoretically, however (as opposed to simply accepting it, and adjusting our terminology accordingly),⁹ the conceptual dynamics of both terms, in their orthodox sociological usage, are thrown into crisis.¹⁰

There is a tension between the use of modernity as an empirical category of historical sociology and its inherent self-referentiality, whereby it necessarily denotes the time of its utterance, whenever the question of change within the present is at issue. The idea of postmodernity is constituted at the point of this tension. In this sense, it is undoubtedly part of the problematic of the modern. But this should not be taken to suggest that the new term is redundant or that, as Marshall Berman has suggested, movements which call themselves postmodern can 'only re-enact, rather than overcome, modernism's deepest troubles and impasses'.¹¹ For if current uses of 'postmodern' and its cognates paradoxically remain within the framework of 'modernity', they do more than just repeat its existing forms. Rather, via their paradoxical character, they both draw attention to, and further develop, its contradictory structure, which is concealed by the nominalism and empiricism of its everyday sociological construal. Examination of claims on behalf of the postmodern demand a reflexivity about the temporal structure of modernity that has hitherto been lacking. They prompt a new version of the question already raised by our brief discussion of Marxism: namely, what form of temporality is at stake in the use of 'modernity' as a category of historical periodization such that the paradox of the postmodern

could arise? Or, more directly, what *kind of time* does 'modernity' inscribe?

In addressing this question, I take as my starting point and thematic perspective Perry Anderson's critique of Marshall Berman's recovery and celebration of a phenomenological concept of modernity in his groundbreaking text *All That is Solid Melts into Air*.¹² Berman's book is, I believe, still the most immediately appealing general account of 'modernity' available, whilst Anderson's critique strikes at, but only partially hits, what I take to be both the main difficulty with the concept and the source of its enduring strength: namely, its homogenization through abstraction of a form of historical consciousness associated with a variety of socially, politically and culturally heterogeneous processes of change. Berman's book has the virtue of dealing with modernity as at once a phenomenological and a sociological category. Anderson's critique has the advantage of raising the question of whether the category is not a merely ideological one (a form of misrepresentation), in the context of a discussion of the conception of historical time required by a materialist conception of history.

This chapter focuses on three distinct but connected approaches to the concept of modernity: modernity as a *category of historical periodization*, a *quality of social experience*, and an (*incomplete*) *project*. Underlying and unifying its account is a concern, derived in large part from the writings of Benjamin and Koselleck, with modernity as a distinct but paradoxical form of historical temporality. Each of the three approaches discussed isolates a different temporal dimension of this underlying conception: its inscription of the *past*, the *present*, and the *future*, respectively. The key to their comprehension will thus be seen to lie in their relations to each other; that is to say, in the dialectics of a certain *temporalization of 'history'*.

Modernity as experience and misrecognition: Berman and Anderson

Berman's account of modernity as the experience of a dynamic and inherently contradictory process of constant change, a 'maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal'¹³ that opens up and closes down avenues of human possibility in more or less equal portions, is well known. I shall not expound it here, except to draw attention to those two of its features which bear most directly on our current concerns. One is the disjunction between the centrality to it of Berman's account of Marx (registered in the title of the book, adopted from the

Communist Manifesto) and the distance it takes from Marx's specifically political analyses. The other is its almost total disregard for the complexities of 'modernity' as a periodizing category. Marx is not merely celebrated as a theoretician of modernity, uncoverer of the contradictory dynamics and broader social consequences of the process of capital accumulation; he is hailed as the herald of 'a paradigmatically modernist *faith*'.¹⁴ His writings are seen to combine analytic insight into the destructive side of the process of capitalist modernization, with an affirmation of its emancipatory potential comparable in scope to the tragic sweep of Goethe's *Faust*. Indeed, in many respects, they are read as a response to the challenge of *Faust*. But for all Berman's appreciation of the dialectical structure of this picture, a crucial part of Marx's own version of it is painted over as outmoded: the formation of a particular class subject. However, contrary to the logic of Western Marxism, Berman refuses to let this undermine his affirmative stance to the processes in question. If anything, it bolsters it, replacing the fallibility of a specific historical projection with the apparently unlimited possibilities of a radically open future. Yet a major part of the intellectual justification for this affirmative stance has been discarded.

This cavalier approach to the elements of an integrated analysis is mirrored in Berman's neglect of questions of periodization. Despite its historical intent (the book aims to renew our sense of modernity by giving us back 'a sense of our own modern roots'), no attempt is made to trace that sense of the modern as a 'coherent whole' which is Berman's object, back to the use of the term as a periodizing category. What is taken to be the first phase of modernity, 'from the start of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth', is allotted a mere six lines in a book of nearly four hundred pages. The periodization of modernity is taken for granted, and its first phase is ignored.¹⁵ The reason appears to be that during this period there was no popular vocabulary for the articulation of the emergent experience of change; something that was not remedied until the revolutionary wave of the 1790s. This is important to Berman because he is concerned with a situation – his present – in which more or less all societies, worldwide, are allegedly undergoing similar experiences of change to a greater or lesser extent. His account thus concentrates on those forms of cultural self-consciousness about such change (*modernism*) that might inform contemporary experience. Yet as Anderson shows, this self-imposed restriction has significant theoretical effects.

Anderson's objections to Berman's account derive more or less exclusively from his reading of Marx. They are fourfold. In the first place, Berman is seen to have produced an egregiously one-sided

version of Marx's account of capitalist modernization, which falls prey to an uncritical, because undifferentiated, concept of historical time. This is reflected, secondly, in an abstract and 'perennial' concept of modernism, which fails to register the historical specificity of aesthetic modernism as a portmanteau concept for what is in fact a set of distinct, if conjuncturally related, movements, which are in any case now definitively over. Thirdly, his modernist ontology of unlimited self-development, although apparently derived from Marx, is actually based in an idealist form of radical liberalism which, from a materialist standpoint at least, is self-contradictory. Finally, his account of modernity as permanent revolution strips the concept of revolution of all temporal and political determinacy, robbing it, in particular, of its temporal specificity as a punctual event. 'The vocation of a socialist revolution,' Anderson concludes with a characteristic flourish, 'would be neither to prolong nor to fulfil modernity, but to abolish it.'¹⁶

The most striking thing about this critique is the way in which it oscillates between two different uses of 'modernity'. On the one hand, it is treated as a flawed and misleading category for the identification and analysis of historical processes which are better understood in quite different terms. On the other, it appears as the legitimate designation for an historical phenomenon, the theoretical comprehension, but not the identification, of which is contested. The difference is difficult, but crucial. Anderson equivocates. He seems, in general, to adopt the first sense: he offers a Marxist critique of the discourse of modernity. Yet his conclusion emphatically presumes the second: modernity is an historical reality, capable of 'prolongation', 'fulfilment' and 'abolition'. The connection resides in the reflexivity of historical experience itself: 'modernity' has a reality as a form of cultural self-consciousness, a lived experience of historical time, which cannot be denied, however one-sided it might be as a category of historical understanding. It is the texture of this historical experience of cultural form that Berman sets out to recreate in the name of its admittedly contradictory emancipatory potential. For Berman, in other words, modernity is in some quite basic sense an historical given, as a form of experience. For Anderson, on the other hand, whilst it might be given as an ideological form (a mode of experience produced and reproduced by the rhythm of the capitalist market), it is given in this specific, restricted and ultimately pejorative sense only. It is a misrepresentation, a form of misrecognition. In its place we are offered an alternative, Marxist account of historical development based on a periodization of modes of production, the rise and decline of classes, and the claims of 'a complex and differential temporality, in which episodes or eras

[are] discontinuous with each other, and heterogeneous within themselves'.¹⁷ Alongside this stands the aspiration to a society that would no longer systematically generate such an illusory form of social consciousness.

The increased specificity promised by such a model of differential time gives it considerable appeal, but there are problems with its opposition to the idea of modernity. For it remains unclear what the relationship is between this model of differential temporality and the ceaseless process of temporal differentiation associated with the idea of modernity itself. In particular, it is unclear what relations there might be between the kind of discontinuity established by what Marx called 'social revolutions' and the use of modernity as an epochal category.¹⁸ The suspicion thus arises that Anderson has seized on a deficiency in Berman's presentation of the concept of modernity (its reduction to a celebratory 'dialectic of modernisation and modernism'), rather than, as he supposes, a fundamental problem with the category itself, which he wants to replace, or at all events decode, with conjunctural analyses of the cultural consequences of capitalist development – conjunctural analyses which, in their privileging of the moment of the present, would appear to be nothing but a modification of the temporal problematic of 'modernity' itself. This uncertainty derives from the absence in both Berman's and Anderson's accounts of an independent treatment of the logic of modernity as a category of historical periodization.

Berman periodizes modernity into three fairly conventional phases – 1500–1789, 1789–1900 and 1900 onwards – of which the middle one is privileged by him as the golden age to be recovered.¹⁹ But there is no consideration of the way in which the idea of modernity itself marks a new way of periodizing history; no consideration of the relation between the kind of historical time occupied by modernity as an epochal category and that which is internal to modernity itself and registered by Berman in terms of the temporal logic of *modernism*, that 'amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernisation'.²⁰ To this extent, Berman remains within the tradition of an unreflexive sociology of modernity, wherein the attempt to establish what is new about 'modern' societies fails to reflect upon the temporal co-ordinates and conceptual implications of this form of investigation itself.²¹ For there *is* something decidedly new about modernity as a category of historical periodization: namely, that unlike other forms of epochal periodization (mythic, Christian or dynastic, for example), it is defined solely in terms of temporal determinants, and temporal

determinants of a very specific kind. As Adorno put it: 'Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category.'²² The failure to recognize the logic of these determinants underlies naive concepts of 'post-modernity' as a new historical epoch which succeeds modernity in historical time in the same way that modernity itself might be thought to have succeeded the 'Middle' Ages.²³

In order to get a grasp of this particular temporal logic, it is useful to refer to Koselleck's reconstruction of the semantic prehistory of *Neuzeit* (literally, 'new time'), a German term for modernity which is found in its composite form only after 1870.²⁴ Consideration of this history will help us to grasp the relative independence of modernity as a category of historical periodization from both the problematic of modernization, to which it is effectively assimilated by Anderson, and the idea of modernism, through which it is celebrated by Berman with such an apparent lack of social and political specificity.

From *Neue Zeit* to *Neuzeit*: Koselleck's historical semantics

The distinctive characteristic of *Neuzeit* as an epochal term is that like *der Moderne*, *les temps modernes*, or 'the modern age', which register the presentness of an epoch to the time of its classification, but even more explicitly, it 'refers only to time, characterising it as new, without, however, providing any indication of the historical content of this time or even its nature as a period'.²⁵ The conditions for such an abstract sense of the historical meaning of the present appear to have developed in five main stages.

1. The word *modernus*, meaning 'of today' as opposed to 'of yesterday' – what is over, finished, or historically surpassed – first came into use in the course of the fifth century AD at the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire, when the cyclical opposition of 'old and new' characteristic of pagan antiquity was replaced by the sense of an irreversible break with the past. (It derived from *modo*, meaning 'recently'.) Generational conflicts about the prestige of ancient writers had appeared in Antiquity (in Horace and Ovid, for example), but as Le Goff points out, 'they did not have a word for "modern", since they did not contrast *novus* with *antiquus*'.²⁶ The sense of the present as new which emerges at this time became the basis for the conflicts between Ancients and Moderns that punctuated the Middle Ages, from the second half of the twelfth century to the beginning of the Renaissance.

2. The first major semantic shift took place with the consciousness

of a new age which developed in Europe in the course of the fifteenth century. This was initially registered in three ways: by the emergence of the terms 'Renaissance' and 'Reformation' for ideas denoting the threshold of a new (unnamed) period; by the designation of the preceding epoch, now taken to be definitively over, as the Middle Ages; and by the fixing of the term 'Antiquity' to denote the pagan culture of ancient Greece and Rome. In the process, a new relationship between the antique or ancient and the modern was established at the expense of the Middle Ages, since the Renaissance gave precedence to the ancient over all other cultures. Here, modern is opposed to medieval rather than to ancient, and the modern has a right to preference only insofar as it *imitates* the ancient.

3. In the third stage, which roughly runs from the sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth, the threshold concepts of Renaissance and Reformation through which consciousness of a new age was initially registered, were transformed into ideas descriptive of now completed historical periods. This called for a term denoting the new period as a whole which followed the Middle Ages. It is at this point that the phrase *neue Zeit* comes into use – although only in a neutral, chronological sense at first – signifying that the times are 'new' by contrast with the Middle Ages or *mittlere Zeiten*. There is no specification of a criterion of newness here. *Neue Zeit* is thus not, at this stage, a category of historical periodization in any substantive sense. Rather, it stands in for the absence of one, along with the continuing use of *modernus*. The connotations of *neue* are, however, sharper than *modernus*, since it had acquired what Le Goff describes as 'an almost sacred baptismal character'²⁷ in the context of medieval Christianity, for which novelty unconnected to the primordial values of the origin was sacrilegious. As Berman has recently reminded us, for the Bible it is God alone who 'makes all things new'.²⁸ This is, of course, also the period of the famous Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, or the 'Battle of the Books' as it came to be known. If the Renaissance is to be characterized by the replacement of the authority of the Church by that of the Ancients, it was this latter form of authority which now, in turn, became the object of attack.

4. It was only during the fourth phase, the Enlightenment, that the initially neutral phrase *neue Zeit* came to acquire the sense of a qualitative claim about the newness of the times, in the sense of their being 'completely other, even better than what has gone before'.²⁹ The condition for this transformation of the sense of the relationship of the present (and its immediate past) to the more distant past – from being a simple addition in a linear sequence of chronological time, to

a qualitative transcendence of the past of an epochal type which is more than the mere rebirth of a more ancient spirit – was a reorientation towards the future. This reorientation could only take place once Christian eschatology had shed its constant expectation of the imminent arrival of doomsday, and once the advance of the sciences and the growing consciousness of the ‘New World’ and its peoples had opened up new horizons of expectation. Only at this point was a conceptual space available for an abstract temporality of qualitative newness which could be of epochal significance, because it could now be extrapolated into an otherwise empty future, without end, and hence without limit. The distinctive structure of the temporality of modernity may thus be seen to derive from a combination of the Christian conception of time as *irreversible* with criticism of its corresponding concept of eternity.³⁰ ‘Modernity’, in the subsequently consolidated sense of *Neuzeit*, may in this respect be understood as the term for an historical sublime – a point of some interest in relation to recent purportedly ‘postmodern’ attempts to reappropriate the concept of the sublime. It gives rise to a new, distinctively historical version of the age-old problem of legitimacy. As Blumenberg puts it: ‘Modernity (*Neuzeit*) was the first and only age that understood itself as an epoch and, in so doing, simultaneously created the other epochs.’ The problem of legitimacy is latent in its ‘claim to carry out a radical break with tradition, and in the incongruity between this claim and the reality of history, which can never begin entirely anew’.³¹ It is this problem of legitimacy that underlies the recent attraction of the term ‘postmodern’.

These developments culminate at the end of the eighteenth century in the context of the acceleration of historical experience precipitated by the Industrial and French Revolutions, in the consolidation of the emergent semantic potential of *neue Zeit* in the coinage *neueste Zeit*: a phrase which definitively separates the qualitative dimension of the idea from its continuing, more ‘neutral’ usage. ‘What could not be achieved in the concept of *neue Zeit* [because of the ambiguity produced by its continued neutral usage – PO] was effected by *neueste Zeit*. It became a concept for the contemporary epoch opening up a new period [which] did not simply retrospectively register a past epoch.’ Similarly, in the decades around 1800, ‘revolution’, ‘progress’, ‘development’, ‘crisis’, ‘Zeitgeist’, ‘epoch’ and ‘history’ itself all acquire temporal determinations never present before:

Time is no longer the medium in which all histories take place; it gains an historical quality . . . history no longer occurs in, but through, time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right. Presupposed by this formulation of experience is a concept of history which is

likewise new: the collective singular form of *Geschichte*, which since around 1780 can be conceived as history in and for itself in the absence of an associated subject or object.³²

Because of the qualitative transformation in the temporal matrix of historical terms which occurs at this time, 'modernity' in the full sense of the term is generally taken to begin here. The modern is no longer simply opposed either to the ancient or to the medieval, but to 'tradition' in general.

5. It is this full sense of a 'newest time' (*neueste Zeiten*), opening up a new period by virtue of the quality of the temporality it involves, which was condensed and generalized in the second half of the nineteenth century into the ideas of *Neuzeit* and *modernité*, therewith coming to be understood as constitutive of the temporality of modernity as such. It is this, the temporality of Baudelaire's and Flaubert's, Simmel's and Benjamin's late nineteenth-century modernity, the historical force of the fundamental objects of which 'lies solely in the fact that they are new',³³ which has been the focus of recent attention to modernity as an aesthetic concept, and more broadly, as a form of social experience. The logic of the new, fashion, and aesthetic modernism as a 'rebellion against the modernity of the philistine' which nonetheless works within the same temporal structure,³⁴ may thus be understood as the result of an aestheticization of 'modernity' as a form of historical consciousness and its transformation into a general model of social experience. In the course of this generalization of an epochal form of historical consciousness into the temporal form of experience itself the dialectical character of the new as the 'ever-same', articulated philosophically in Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence, and deciphered economically in Marx's analysis of the logic of commodity production, is revealed for the first time.

Finally, and more tentatively, to take us up to the present, we might complete this account by adding a sixth stage, in which the peculiar and paradoxical abstractness of the temporality of the new is at once problematized and affirmed. This is the stage after the Second World War during which, as Raymond Williams has put it, "modern" shifts its reference from "now" to "just now" or even "then", and for some time has been a designation always going into the past with which [in English] "contemporary" may be contrasted for its presentness.³⁵ 'Modernity', now fixed as a discrete historical period within its own temporal scheme, as the golden age of its cultural self-consciousness, hardens into a mere name and is left stranded in the past. The Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns is replaced by a Quarrel between