

# THE CONCEPT OF MODERNITY: A BRIEF REVIEW

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the concepts of modernity as interpreted by classical theorists of modernity such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and contemporary theorists of modernity such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck. All of the three classical theorists of modernity introduce a single dominant force which is the basic dynamic of transformation for understanding the inherent features of modernity. For Marx, the major transformative power shaping the modern world is capitalism. As a result, for him, modernity shows itself in capitalism. For Durkheim, the major transformative power shaping the modern world is industrialism. Weber focuses on rationalization as expressed in technology, capitalism and bureaucracy. Hence, he saw that one of the main drivers of change throughout modernity is rationality. For Giddens, modernity is developed due to the interactions of many institutions and each level specified by classical theorists plays a part. Thus, for him, modernity has four institutional dimensions: capitalism, industrialism, surveillance, and military power. Beck discusses modernity by distinguishing two phases of modernity. The first of which is simple modernity which is very much coextensive with industrial society. The axial principle of industrial society is the distribution of goods. The second phase, emerged out of simple modernity and began in the second half of the twentieth century, is reflexive modernity. Thus, the axial principle of the second modernity is the distribution of dangers. But, the second modernity, for Beck, is still, and at the same time, an industrial society since it is mainly industry that is involved in the creation of risk. In general, the concept of modernity discussed by both the three classical theorists of modernity and the two contemporary thinkers are mutually inclusive rather than exclusive. As a result, modernity has four main parts: capitalism, industrialism, surveillance and military power.

**Keywords:** The Concepts of Modernity; Contemporary theorists of modernity; Classical theorists of modernity; Karl Marx; Max Weber; Emile Durkheim; Anthony Giddens; Ulrich Beck.

## I. Introduction

How modernity can be defined? Actually, modernity has been defined by different researchers in various ways; it can, in reality, be depicted and deciphered from different points of view and at various levels. As the fundamental features and incorporation of the developmental procedures of modern society, modernity shows itself in all parts of social life. It is a general idea which involves the economy, politics, culture, society and numerous different elements. Hence, it cannot be subsumed under one elucidation. From this, it is inferred that its definitions are diverse and different.

Although the concept of modernity is very broad, in this paper, an attempt is made to explore the concept of modernity as it has been acquired from the classical idea of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim and as it is interpreted in contemporary theorists of modernity, for example, Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck.

## II. Classical Theorists of Modernity

Karl Marx expounded on thoughts concerning modernity and made considerable leaps forward in the comprehension of the idea. He was one of the great classical scholars to create systematic perspectives on modern societies and to deliver a critical discourse on modernity. His explanation of modernity is firmly connected to his investigation of modern society. The particular meaning of Karl Marx's modern society is the capitalist society. Hence, his conception of modernity is specifically linked to the advancement of modern capitalism and its effect on social arrangements. Indeed, he acknowledges that the main transformative power shaping the modern period is capitalism. The rise of capitalism, according to Karl Marx, relies on the exchange of commodities produced through the use of wage labor and the growth of capital in the form of money with the goal of creating a profit (Feng & Xing, 2006). To put it plainly, for Karl Marx, modernity is capitalistic in both its economic system and its other institutions. As a result, it shows itself in capitalism.

Max Weber, the other classical theorist, acknowledges Karl Marx's conviction that capitalism is the major transformative force of the modern period. However, Max Weber did not see the change from feudalism to industrial capitalist society as caused by the development of productive power<sup>1</sup>. Rather, he held that what made the capitalist industrial society conceivable was an outgrowth of the Protestant hard working ethics, which requested diligent work and the accumulation of wealth. This new type of bourgeois capitalism depends on the development of rational action. Since capitalism is profit based, it requested rationalization, quantitative calculation or accounting used in an economic activity. So, results could be figured and after that effectiveness and efficiency could be expanded (Weber, 1992). In this way, rationalization became the distinguishing characteristic of modern industrial capitalist societies. He has, therefore, concluded that rationality is main characteristic of modernity.

Emile Durkheim, the other great classical theorist of modernity, discloses his idea of modernity in relation to organic society. He says that the rise of organic solidarity with the weakening of mechanical (collective consciousness) is the beginning of modernity; modern societies are organic rather than mechanical. According to Durkheim, organic (modern) societies are characterized by differentiation; they are characterized by multiple of occupations, plural ethnicities and varying people. Since functional differentiation results from the division of labour, Emile Durkheim also explains the concept of modernity in relation to the division of labor. The division of labor also comes with the advent of industrialization. Thus, his idea of modernity is highly related with the industrial society. From this, it is possible to understand that, for Emile Durkheim, the major transformative power shaping the modern world is industrialization. Thus, according to Emile Durkheim, modernity results from large scale industrialization (Durkheim, 1984).

In fact, the definitions of modernity given by each of the above 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars are various. Despite the diversity in their understanding, the reality is that they have highlighted all the then major indicators or characteristics of modernity. As a result, it can be inferred that these scholars have shed light on the idea of modernity.

By 1920s, all of the above three scholars were dead. As we have now entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, clearly the world would be altogether different than it was in 1920s. The point is whether the modifications on the world since that time are simple and continuous with those related with modernity or are so extraordinary and irregular that the contemporary world is better portrayed by another term called postmodern<sup>2</sup>.

### III. Contemporary Theorists of Modernity

Anthony Giddens, one of the famous contemporary thinkers, rejects that we have moved from modernity to post-modernity. Rather, he claims that we are still in the modern age. He further argues that we are presently at the plain outcome of modernity where key attributes of modernity progressed toward becoming radicalized and universalized than any time in recent memory. By this, he underlies historical continuity, rather than disjuncture (Giddens, 1990).

By modernity, Anthony Giddens means institutions and modes of behavior began in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and spread to the other parts of the globe afterwards. According to him, modernity has developed due to the interaction of many institution; it has multidimensions. It has mainly four institutional aspects: capitalism, industrialism, administrative power, and military power. These four institutional dimensions of modernity have its own distinctive set of causal processes and structures. However, when they are taken together, they provide a framework which is sufficient enough for comprehending some of the distinctive features of modernity (Giddens, 1990). It is important to note that capitalism and industrialism are not only given by Anthony Giddens since they are also mentioned by classical theorists. But, surveillance and military power are specifically introduced by Anthony Giddens.

Capitalism is a system of commodity production to be sold in the market to maximize profit. In relation to this, it has attributes such as commodity production, private ownership of capital, property-less wage labour and a class system derived from these attributes. And, industrialism refers to the use of machine technology

<sup>1</sup> By productive power, Marx means the combination of the means of labor (tools, machinery, land, infrastructure, and so on) with human labour power.

<sup>2</sup> Post-modernity is a condition recognized by the rejection of the grand narratives which are the over-reaching storylines by means of which we have placed history. The post-modern standpoint acknowledges heterogeneous or many ways to knowledge. Thus, from this standpoint, science does not have a favored place. It is a move away from endeavors to ground one epistemology and additionally a move away from faith in human built progress (Lyotard, 1985).

or inanimate power to produce goods and to control or transform nature. Surveillance refers to the control of information and monitoring of the activities of subjects by states. The last, namely, military power is used by states to control the means of violence. This implies that in the modern world, military power rests with the nation state (Giddens, 1990; Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

Moreover, Anthony Giddens adds that modernity is dynamic and its dynamism is kept up by three aspects that are associated with each other. The three sources of the dynamism of modernity are time-space separation, disembedding mechanisms, and reflexivity (Giddens, 1990; Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

Giddens sees that the time and space separation provides dynamism to modernity. In pre-modern-day social orders, time and space were coroneted together. In such societies, to calculate time or any sort of everyday activities, time was connected to space. Thus, before the invention of the mechanical clock, time was constantly comprehended only in connection to space. In modern societies, however, due to the mass dissemination of mechanical clock from the late eighteenth century onward, time was separated from space and became universal. The time also turned out to be an abstract and empty phenomenon. The detachment of time from space and understanding them without physical locale became abstract means of ordering social activity. Besides, the emptying of time leads to the emptying of space. Emptying of space refers to the separation of space from a place. The concept of a place is understood in relation to the idea of locale. By local, it is to mean the physical settings of social activity as located somewhere geographically. In pre-modern societies, space and place were used synonymously. But, with the rise of modernity and abstract time, the idea of space is separated from the idea of a place. As a result, space also became an abstract and empty phenomenon like time. Thus, time and space, in modern societies, turned out to be more abstract and standardized (Giddens, 1990).

Anthony Giddens holds that the separation of time and space causes disembedding of traditional forms of relationships. By disembedding, he means the lift out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and the restructures of them over indefinite ranges of time and space (Giddens, 1990).

Anthony Giddens identified two types of disembedding mechanisms. The two kinds of disembedding mechanisms mentioned by Anthony Giddens are symbolic tokens and abstract systems. Symbolic tokens are media of exchange that lift transactions out of the local community and produce other new patterns of transactions over an indefinite span of time and space. Money can be taken as one of the best instances of symbolic tokens. The second disembedding mechanism i.e. expert systems expel social relations from the immediacies of context by providing guarantees of expectations across an indefinite span of time and space. It builds trust in a body of expert knowledge. Here, a car driving can be a good example; that is, although the actor does not have the knowledge of the technology, he/she keeps the trust over it. Hence, expert system provides the guarantee of performance across an indefinite span of time and space (Giddens, 1990).

All disembedding systems rely on 'trust'. Trust, here, is vested in abstract capacities (systems) instead of people. For instance, when we utilize money related tokens, we do as such on the assumption that people will respect their value. We have faith in the architect system that designs building. For the layman, trust guarantees we do not need mastery into expert systems. Besides, trust should be conceived in relation to risk; that is, trust presupposes awareness of the circumstance of risk (Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

The last aspects of modernity that keeps up its dynamism is a reflexive appropriation of knowledge. Reflexivity implies the custom that one inspects, reflects and reforms oneself; it is simply self-reflection. The reflexivity of modern social life is manifested in that social practices are continuously analyzed and renewed in accordance with incoming information about those practices. Accordingly, they continuously change their attributes (Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

In fact, Anthony Giddens does not say that the concept of reflexivity is unique to modernity. Rather, he holds that it is only in the periods of modernity that reflexivity applies to each feature of human life, including technological intervention into the physical world (Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

Lastly, Anthony Giddens holds that modernity has essentially global nature. It is the progress of the four dimensions of modernity i.e. industrialism, capitalism, administrative power and military power into the international division of labor, world capitalist economy, nation-state system, and world military power respectively that make modernity global (Giddens, 1990). Thus, modernity, according to Anthony Giddens, culminates in globalization.

Ulrich Beck is also one of the contemporary theorists of modernity. Like Anthony Giddens, he also focuses on risk, trust and the reflexive appropriation of knowledge. This is to mean that these ideas are also central to Ulrich Beck's theory of late modernity. Ulrich Beck identifies two phases of modernization. He calls the first stage of modernization simple modernization. At this stage of modernity, agrarian societies were transformed into industrial society; simple modernity is very much coextensive with industrial society. The fundamental principle of industrial society (simple modernity) is the dissemination of products or goods. This industrial

society is also organized on the basis of social classes. The second stage, started in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is reflexive modernization. Ulrich Beck calls this reflexive modernity new modernity. This new modernity is developed out of industrial society but different from the industrial modernity. It is a stage in which modern society challenges itself with the negative outcomes of the first modernity and moves from a structure based on the creation and distribution of goods to a model based on the distributions of dangers or bads. Thus, the fundamental feature of risk society is the distribution of risks or dangers. According to Beck, industrial society or simple modernity has created many new dangers of risks unknown to simple modernization. In addition to this, the new or second modernity has rejected the old modernity and enable the individual to take his/her own decisions without any reference to his/her class consideration. In this new modernity, the social connections and institutions have to be individually chosen. In fact, in this new modern society, social ties and connection must be built up, kept up and reformed by individuals themselves. This process of social transformation also creates risk. Thus, the new modernity results in a risk society and the risks in the modern society are created by our own social development and by the development of science and technology. However, the risk society, Ulrich Beck claims, is still, and at the same time, an industrial society. The reason is that it is mainly industry in conjunction with science and technology that is mainly responsible for the formation of risks that affect modern humankind (Beck, 1992).

## IV. Conclusion

In general, the concept of modernity discussed by both the three classical theorists of modernity and the two contemporary thinkers are mutually inclusive rather than exclusive. Consequently, according to these thinkers, modernity consists of mainly four main institutional dimensions: capitalism, industrialism, administrative power and military power. By taking them together, it is possible to understand the central features of modernity. Besides, these four aspects of modernity are globalized and thus modernity has a global nature. Along with these four aspects of modernity, it is possible to find characteristics such as a new concept of self based on individualism, rational and scientific thinking, the birth and growth of modern nation-state, the spread of education, the birth and spread of mass media, the creation of the middle class, the rise of representative democracy, increasing separation of the public and private spheres or the growth of the idea of privacy, the ideology of progress and development, increasing role of modern manufacture, the expansion of technology, the spread of urbanization, and the rise of globalization.

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