

MODERNITY AND ITS ENDLESS DISCONTENTS

Donald N. Levine  
The University of Chicago

For publication in the proceedings of the conference "Talcott Parsons and Social Science,"  
Russell Sage Foundation, December 6-7, 2002

NOT FOR QUOTATION WITHOUT THE PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR

April 11, 2003

## MODERNITY AND ITS ENDLESS DISCONTENTS

Donald N. Levine  
The University of Chicago

If there is anything like a Great Tradition in modern social theory, it must be the multigenerational effort to come to terms with what has come to be called 'Modernity,' in which its participants posit some inexorable direction of transformation that sooner or later will engulf the entire human world—from Comte's law of inexorable stages, to Tocqueville's irresistible trend toward social equality, to Marx's dictum of *de te fabula narratur*, to Spencer's law of evolution, to Weber's thesis of world-historical rationalization. In the generation after World War II, this tradition underwent a remarkable revitalization, thanks to what were arguably some of the finest intellectual productions of social science in this century. These include:

Karl Deutsch 1953. *Nationalism and Social Communication*  
 Reinhard Bendix 1956. *Work and Authority in Industry*  
 Neil Smelser 1958. *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution*  
 Lloyd Fallers 1963. "Equality, Modernity, and Democracy in the New States"  
 Clifford Geertz 1963. "The Integrative Revolution"  
 S. M. Lipset 1963. *The First New Nation*  
 S. N. Eisenstadt [1974] 1963-68. [essays on] *Tradition, Change, and Modernity*  
 R. Bendix 1964. *Nation-Building and Citizenship*  
 L. Pye and S. Verba, eds. 1965, *Political Culture and Political Development*  
 David Apter 1965. *The Politics of Modernization*  
 Edward Shils 1965. *Political Development in the New States*  
 Myron Weiner, ed. 1966. *Modernization: The Dynamics of Growth*

For these distinguished authors and many others of that period, the work of Talcott Parsons offered a constant point of reference. Their investigations occurred at a time when Parsons had returned to the concerns of his first publications, those stimulated by his study of Sombart and Weber as analysts of modern capitalism. Although a later generation would hastily reject the rubric of modernization which served as a convenient label for this literature and Parsons's intellectual leadership, a glance at Parsons's bibliography during this high point of modernization studies may suffice to correct some of the one-sided readings of this material. For example, far from restricting attention to the nation-state, in *The System of Modern Societies* (1966) Parsons analyzed the modern societal universe as a global system. Far from projecting convergence of its constituent nations toward a uniform pattern, within that system he identified significant differences in the roles played by different nations, as well as the different development paths they follow in the course of modernizing. Far from assuming continuous historical progress and a conflict-free staging of modernity, Parsons focused, within a dozen years, on: the dynamics of fascism and communism, the strains that produced McCarthyism, the sources of military aggressiveness in Western nations, the structured strains in the lives of women and young people in industrial societies, and the problems of integrating African-Americans into American society, all in the service of contributing ideas to replace the simpler models of social and cultural evolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Even those who still object to use of the term "modernization" may find the category of "modernity" theoretically fruitful (Lechner 1985, 159). What is more, although the reaction against Parsons and modernization theory may have removed such contributions from the contemporary sociological canon, it cannot do so indefinitely. If modernization has been removed from the curriculum, it has not been removed from historical actualities. And just as Parsons discovered, after proclaiming the unforgettable question, "Who now reads Spencer?"—only to write, a quarter-century later, that Spencer had in fact provided "very much of the framework of a satisfactory sociological scheme" (Parsons 1961, x), so social science must now discover, a quarter-century after asking, "Who now reads Parsons?" that regarding modernization as much else,<sup>1</sup> the work of Parsons remains a valuable resource. That said, it

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Gould (1991) has notably described *The Structure of Social Action* as "sixty years ahead of its time."

goes without saying that just as Parsons’s thinking underwent continuous evolution—at a pace that often dizzied those who followed him—so what he had to say about societal change and modernity offers some telling words, not the last word, for the endless task of understanding modernity. In the present paper, I allude to three of his contributions: the theory of evolutionary universals, the notion of breakthrough revolutions, and the functional differentiation schema.

### THE NATURE OF MODERNITY

At the most general level, discourse about modernity conceives the term as referring either to (1) a historical epoch; (2) an identifiable set of phenomena and processes; or (3) a set of ideas and ideals regarding the future development of society (Wittrock 2000). Björn Wittrock discounts the first two of these meanings, arguing that in order to demarcate the boundaries of an epoch, one needs substantive criteria; and that diagnostic phenomena commonly used for that purpose, like unregulated markets and multi-party political democracy, have not characterized most of the societies we would be willing to call “modern.” True, but not entirely germane; perhaps Wittrock’s illustrations are too specific. In contrast, let us adduce phenomena that the classics of modern social theory have portrayed as distinctive features of the modern order. Inasmuch as each of those theorists tends to finger *one* phenomenon as the central defining feature of modernity, I shall attempt to create a universe of dialogue among them<sup>2</sup> by designating the phenomena they discuss in terms of five major categories, as in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. CONCEPTIONS OF MODERNITY: ESSENTIAL PROCESSES**

Key feature	Differentiation		Unification	Equalization	Disciplining	Rationalization
	Social	Functional/ Individual				
Locus Classicus	Smith, <i>Wealth of Nations</i>	Simmel, <i>On Social Differentiation</i>	Tocqueville, <i>Ancien Regime</i>	Tocqueville, <i>Democracy in America</i>	Weber, <i>Protestant Ethic</i>	Comte, <i>Positive Philosophy</i>
Other Contributor	Comte Spencer Durkheim Marx	Durkheim Thomas Redfield Eisenstadt	Comte Elias Geertz Bendix Apter	Hegel Durkheim Weber Ortega Marshall	Freud Mannheim Elias Bendix Gorski	Hegel, Weber Simmel Mannheim Riesman Black, Bell

#### Modernity as Social Differentiation

The notion of differentiation has taken at least three different forms. Initially it connoted the division of labor in production and exchange. Later it came to designate the process whereby individuals become increasingly distinct and unlike one another. At the most general level of analysis, it came to signify the separation of different institutional sectors or spheres of action from one another. In what follows I shall discuss the first two meanings and save the more general meaning for the explicit discussion of Parsons further on.

The *division of labor* figures as perhaps the most frequently defined marker of the modern order. Adam Smith, arguably the founding father of modernity theory, centered it in the properties of what he called commercial society. These properties were twofold: a remarkable improvement in the dexterity of productive labor and the extension of opportunities to exchange the products of that labor through a monetarized market. Behind all this was an extended process of division of labor. Specialization in production was not planned, but evolved spontaneously as individual producers came to see the benefit of exploiting an advantageous position, however reached, in a system of exchange.

<sup>2</sup> In so doing, I deliberately avoid other ways of dealing with intellectual differences of this sort, i.e., by viewing them as so many alternative theories (what may be called a ‘pluralist’ account); by maintaining the primacy of one to which all others are either subordinated (a ‘positivist’ account); by trying to integrate them into a single conception (a ‘synthetic’ account); or by reducing them to expressions of underlying socio-economic or cultural interests (a ‘contextualist’ account). See Levine 1995.

The idea of the division of labor was developed more or less continuously by the major theorists of modernity. Comte analyzed ways in which the division of labor promotes cooperative endeavors and societal stability, and considered the division of labor in the sciences as well as in industry.<sup>3</sup> Marx advanced the analysis by distinguishing between the division of labor in society at large, which he described as arising spontaneously through a series of historical stages, and division of labor in the industrial workplace, which he saw as centrally planned and forcibly instituted for the sake of competitive advantage. Spencer generalized the concept into a cosmic process of increasing complexification, from incoherent homogeneity to coherent heterogeneity. Standing nimbly on Smith's shoulders, Spencer celebrated the growth of functional specialization in the modern economy and extended its scope to include the differentiation of political and ecclesiastical structures. Durkheim famously focused on the division of labor in his first major monograph, extending Comte's notions about the solidaristic effects of functional specialization. In this century, most theorists of modernization have included some reference to functional specialization as a key principle of the modern socioeconomic order. In our own time, Niklas Luhmann has insisted that functional differentiation must serve as the master concept for all theorizing about modern societies.

Simmel inaugurated his work as a sociologist with a monograph on social differentiation, which analyzed a number of respects in which the process of *individuation* occurs in developments from pre-modern epochs to the present. These include the transposition of jural responsibility from collectivities to individuals; the enlargement of groups that creates more space for the expression of individuality; the transition from a condition where mental activity is circumscribed by shared beliefs to one that permits individualized intellectual achievement; and the shift from a pattern of compulsory group affiliations based on birth and propinquity to a pattern of more voluntary associations that create an individuated constellation of affiliations (Simmel 1989 [1890]).

Durkheim linked his master trend of functional specialization to a process of individuation with its attendant cult of the individual. W. I. Thomas described the "individualization of behavior" as a process of "evolution, connected with mechanical inventions, facilitated communication, the diffusion of print, the growth of cities, business organization, the capitalistic system, specialized occupations, scientific research, doctrines of freedom, the evolutionary view of life, etc., [whereby] the family and community influences have been weakened and the world in general has been profoundly changed in content, ideals, and organization" (Thomas 1923, 70). Robert Redfield charted the path of modernization across four Yucatecan communities as an ideal type constructed as if a single historic change were involved. He found decreasing isolation and increasing heterogeneity among the four communities accompanied by progressive individualization, for which he adduced twelve different types of evidence—including increased assignment of individual rights in land and diminished use of collective labor and the extension of primary kinship terms beyond the elementary family (Redfield 1941, 355-57). Eisenstadt views the importance of conscious moral choice among members of fundamentalist movements as an indicator of one of their distinctly modern characteristics: the modern emphasis on the autonomy of human will (Eisenstadt 1999, 91).

### Modernity as Political Unification

This category actually combines three processes: political centralization, popular sovereignty, and popular mobilization. They have in common the extension of connections between a political center and peripheries, such that the center becomes more effective in influencing the peripheries and at the same time more accessible to and affected by them. Tocqueville analyzed the linkage between the mobilization of the populace in the French Revolution—their animation on behalf of great duties and common causes—and the increased jurisdiction of a central state authority, and he depicted in unforgettable lines the power of the

---

<sup>3</sup> "C'est seulement quand la répartition régulière des travaux humains a pu devenir convenablement étendue que l'état social a pu commencer à acquérir spontanément une consistance et une stabilité supérieures à l'essor quelconque des divergences particulières" (Comte 1969, 479).

sovereign populace in the American republic. Comte considered the formation of societies of increasing scale, culminating in all of humanity, to be the master trend of secular history. G. H. Mead tied the formation of national-mindedness to a growing responsiveness to an emerging international community.

Norbert Elias analyzed state formation as a recurrent process of centralization over ever-expanding territories and a devolution of authority from the center to wider peripheries in his historical sociology of French society. Reinhard Bendix likewise emphasized the modern process of nation-building and extension of citizenship in Western Europe, Russia, India, and Japan. Karl Deutsch investigated the formation of modern nations by examining processes of communication and mobilization. Daniel Lerner's classic highlighted the changed orientation of locals toward a wider social world as a key feature of modernization in Turkey. In a seminal paper of enduring value, Clifford Geertz depicted the simultaneous processes of centralization and centrifugal assertions in the modernizing states of Asia and Africa, showing that the former involved newly awakened popular desires to build an efficient, dynamic modern state: "a demand for progress, for a rising standard of living, more effective political order, greater social justice, and beyond that of 'playing a part in the larger arena of world politics'" (Geertz 1973, 258).

### Modernity as Jural Equalization

For Tocqueville, the dominant phenomenon of modern society is the secular trend of equalization of social status in the community. Although he found this phenomenon most pronounced in the United States, he interpreted it as a master trend for all societal orders. (The prospect of its inexorability, he said, filled him with *une sorte de terreur religieuse*.) Surveying its progression across the centuries of French history, Tocqueville noted how privileges that distinguished different social orders were one by one dissolving in the face of this awesome process.

For Hegel, too, the extension of rights figured as a master trend over the ages. The movement from states where one is free to those where some are free to those where all are free entailed an expansion of rights guaranteed by formalized law. Incorporating Hegel's notion of law and ideas about Prussian bureaucracy of Hegel's time, Weber depicted the foundations of rational-legal bureaucracy as a core phenomenon of modern social organization. As Weber observed, this inexorable process of bureaucratization had a leveling effect, in that all persons were to be treated equally by its rational-legal norms.

Durkheim's treatment of this process was more muted, but he, too, considered it a necessary part of the work of modernization. Absent the equalization of opportunity in a functionally differentiated society, the forced restriction of occupations to specific social strata would produce pathological conflicts. Durkheim thought that sooner or later inheritance rights would have to be curtailed as part of this leveling. Although Ortega y Gasset had a different stance regarding this development, he found the equalization of opportunities and resources quite inexorable. T. H. Marshall went on to analyze the array of rights—civil, political, and social—that were progressively enacted and extended to more and more parts of the population.

### Modernity as Extension of Discipline

For a small but significant number of authors, modernization is marked by a substantial change in socialization patterns and moral habits. Weber famously put his finger on this change as an essential part of the transformation into capitalist society, regarding the ascetic, methodical organization of daily activities in this world as essential to the operation of the capitalist form of organization. Continuing Weber's thought, Karl Mannheim analyzed the ways in which the functional rationalization of worldly activities requires a heightened level of self-rationalization. Bendix investigated the ways in which industrial managers sought to extend this new kind of discipline to factory workers in Russia and the United States. Coming with a very different kind of interest, Freud analyzed the discontents of modern civilization in terms of a heightened level of control of natural impulses. In *The Civilizing Process*, the master analyst of this shift, Norbert Elias, documented the slow and steady control of psychic drives over the past millennium. The major agent of this transformation in recent centuries has been

the institution of primary education, where pupils are taught punctuality, orderliness, and other forms of self-control along with basic academic skills. Charles Camie has illuminated how philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment came to acquire habits of independence and universalistic values through changes in the socialization processes to which they were exposed.

Michel Foucault speaks of the formation of a “disciplinary society” in modern times, one that is based on

a whole set of instruments, techniques, and procedures either by 'specialized' institutions (the penitentiaries or 'houses of correction' of the nineteenth century), or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end (schools, hospitals), or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power . . . ; or by apparatuses that have made discipline their principle of internal functioning (the disciplinarization of the administrative apparatus from the Napoleonic period), or finally by state apparatuses whose major, if not exclusive, function is to assure that discipline reigns over society as a whole (the police). (Foucault 1979, 215-16)

More generally, this phenomenon has been so dramatic that it has been referred to as a “disciplinary revolution” (Gorski 1993).

### Cultural Rationalization

Some theorists have focused on the progressive accumulation of knowledge as the key phenomenon of the modern epoch. Taking a page from Turgot, Comte laid the groundwork for this view by taking the maturation of biology and the arrival of sociology (called social physics at first) as positive sciences to be markers of the new era. The hallmark of the new age would be the guidance of societal development on the basis of positively grounded social knowledge. Hegel espoused a comparable conception, identifying modernity with the triumph of reason through history. For him, this formed the groundwork of the modern era, albeit in ways that Comte (and Marx) would consider residues of a metaphysical age. Hegel also drew a clear distinction between objective and subjective rationality, the former consisting of the progressive embodiment of a struggle to attain perfected systems of morality in the state and its laws; the latter, consisting of the growth of self-consciousness and the articulation of that self-consciousness through art, religion, and philosophy.

Georg Simmel continued to observe a distinction between objectified forms of knowledge and their appropriation by subjects for the sake of personal growth. The former consisted of such objectified forms as science, ethics, art, philosophy, and the like; the latter took the form of what he called “subjective culture,” or cultivation. Unlike Hegel, he saw the creation of objective culture in the modern world far outstripping subjective culture. Weber began his work on rationality by investigating the process of subjective rationalization as part of the system of modern Western capitalism, and concluded his comparative studies of the world religions by attending to the objectified forms of Western rationality in all institutional and cultural spheres. Cyril Black dealt with the phenomenal growth of knowledge in recent centuries as the central factor in modernization. Christopher Jencks and David Riesman (1968) connected this growth of knowledge with the ascendance of research criteria in universities as a modernizing process that had revolutionized the academic world. Daniel Bell went on to take the centrality of objectified knowledge as the key identifying feature of late capitalism, which he called post-industrial society, a finding that later theorists have continued to develop.

## THE REVOLUTIONS OF MODERNITY

These processes were none of them novel. They evolved over several centuries, as many authors have noted.<sup>4</sup> Each process possesses adaptive advantages. As such, one might

---

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Marx, and Durkheim described the division of labor as having evolved over millennia. Comte and Elias described the formation of increasingly inclusive societal entities as an age-old process. Tocqueville and Elias represent the evolution of equalizing and civilizing processes, respectively, over many centuries of French history. For Comte and Weber, the processes of cultural rationalization extended across millennia.

interpret them in the mode of what Parsons referred to as evolutionary universals—structures offering such adaptive advantages that any society incorporating them would want to hold on to them, and that all societies would sooner or later wish to incorporate them.

Despite their long prehistories, the fact that the changes of the past two centuries have struck so many people as creating a radically different sort of lifeworld must be acknowledged. Another idea from the Parsons repertoire helps us do that, the idea of Breakthrough. For what happened in the modern period was an acceleration and intensification of those processes such that differences of degree became flagrantly qualitative differences.

In addition, what was novel in the modern world was not only the intensity and rapidity with which these processes unfolded, it was also an unprecedented level of enthusiasm for their very novelty. *Innovation as such* came to be prized, and *that* was a momentous change. Remember that the term modern comes from Latin *modo* (just now), a term which historically had negative connotations. Even up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'modern' was a suspect term, signifying something brash or deviant, in poor taste compared with what was ancient or venerable (Williams 1983, 208). What is more, the notion that the world could intentionally be remade also figured as a distinctive feature of the modern world.

Intensification of long-brewing changes, celebration of the new, and intimations of intentionality have led many to refer to the transformations that ushered in the modern order with the trope of revolution—most commonly, the industrial and the democratic revolutions, at times also the scientific revolution, the managerial revolution, the education revolution, the communications revolution, the social revolution, and the like.

In keeping with that usage, I provide in Figure 2 a schema that connects a typology of Breakthrough revolutions, using terms coined by the authors named, with the central modernizing processes just surveyed, and indicates some benefits associated with each of these transforming processes.

**Figure 2. THE “REVOLUTIONS” AND THE BENEFITS OF MODERNITY**

Key process	Differentiation Soc. Functional/Individual		Unification <sup>5</sup>	Equalization <sup>8</sup>	Disciplining	Cultural Rationalization
Associated revolution	Industrial Revolution		Integrative Revolution (Geertz)	Social Revolution (Fararo)	Disciplinary Revolution (Gorski)	Academic Revolution (Jencks-Riesman)
Adaptive benefits	Goods & services	Freedom	Collective efficacy	Justice	Civility	Knowledge

### The Benefits of Modernity

In many accounts of modernization, changes associated with the improvement of production and enhancement of commerce figure prominently. They form the centerpiece of what Adam Smith considered the new type of society, which he described as “commercial” in contrast to the previous “agricultural” type of society. The division of labor was the most important single factor in producing its dramatic rise in the standard of living, such that a frugal peasant in his modern society lived far better than kings who ruled over thousands of savages.<sup>6</sup> Smith’s hyperbole was outdone by Marx and Engels, who proclaimed that the division of labor as instantiated in capitalist society had led to monumental productions, far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals. Like the Scottish moralists, Durkheim lumped together as “civilization” such consequences of the division of

<sup>5</sup> What is often called the Democratic Revolution consists of a combination of both of these processes.

<sup>6</sup> Smith’s account followed that of Adam Ferguson, whom some have called the “first sociologist” and who may be said to have initiated discourse on the social theory of modernity. In his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), Ferguson offered a theory of the development of society from a “rude” to a “polished” state. The characteristics of polished society include the cultivation of arts and sciences, the attainment of efficient administration, and the refinement of commercial practices. Smith’s analysis was carried forward by John Millar, who explored the impact of progress in the arts and manufactures upon the relations of the sexes and the structures of government.

labor as progress in the arts, sciences, technology, and standard of living, though he denied that any of these benefits possessed a moral nature.

The benefits of political unification were also hailed by a number of theorists of modernity. These included pacification of territories under the command of a single regime, the ability to mobilize citizenries to combat disasters from nature or attacks from outside powers, and the provision of greater benefits to all within its boundaries. The movement toward hegemony of universalistic norms has had many benefits. Among these benefits Tocqueville included the accessibility of primary education to all, the enhanced productivity that comes from the promise of mobility, the diminution of warlike passions from eliminating stratification based on honor, and the toleration of diverse religions. As Durkheim foresaw, securing the rights of previously disadvantaged groups has promoted social harmony. Equalization under the law led to a more contented populace as well as to a sense of living in a more just society. Despite his misgivings about equalization, Ortega observed that extending rights and resources to more of the population was a change that promoted vital energies and vastly increased human possibilities.

The benefits of discipline included the capacity of citizens to live together in a civil manner as well as the ability to perform occupational tasks on a regular and reliable basis. Many authors (Weber, Mannheim, Bendix, Gorski) have found modern industrial labor and bureaucratic work to be dependent on new levels of self-discipline. Elias has found this essential for people to get along in situations of dense interaction, and Freud considered such self-control generically important for the achievements of civilization. Others, however, have found the new levels of self-control to be intrinsically valuable; thus, Weber considered the formation of genuine personality through ethical regulation of daily conduct to be a beneficial outcome of the spirit that ushered in the era of modern capitalism (Hennis 1988).

The benefits of rationalized culture are similarly both instrumental and intrinsically valuable. From the Enlightenment onward the enlargement of a knowledge base has been hailed as a crucial resource for enhancing human wellbeing. This includes both the development of bodies of codified knowledge and the spread of techniques for improved cognition. Modern consumers came to expect continuous improvements in commodities of all sorts thanks to new kinds of validated knowledge. Beyond that, the very existence of bodies of works representing an uninhibited quest for truth has been taken as a key feature of civilization (Whitehead 1933).

The Discontents of Modernity

From the onset of the modernizing revolutions, a host of discontents have been associated with the division of labor and its effects in the modern occupational and market systems.

**Figure 3. THE MODERN REVOLUTIONS AND THEIR ASSOCIATED DISCONTENTS**

Process	<u>Differentiation</u> Soc. Functional/Individual		Unification	Equalization	Disciplining	Cultural Rationalization
Revolution	Industrial		Integrative	Social	Disciplinary	Academic
Benefits	Commerce		Efficacy	Justice	Civility	Knowledge
Associated Discontents	Hyperspecial- ization; Alienation; Consumerism	Personal malaise; Social deficits	Loss of local autonomies, cultures; violence	Support for mediocrity; erosion of standards	Psychic repression	“Tragedy of culture”; Jacobin barbarities

Intense specialization in industrial production elicited numerous critiques about the dehumanizing consequences of such work. Repetition of simple operations was said to make workers “as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become” and the dexterity thus acquired to come “at the expense of [a person’s] intellectual, social, and martial virtues.” The hegemony of commerce created a society in which, as Smith further put it, “every man . . . becomes in some measure a merchant”—with the attendant calculating, profit-



oriented habits of mind (Smith 1976, II, 303; I, 26).<sup>7</sup> The monetarization of exchange, in Simmel's analysis, has led to the reduction of all personal and aesthetic values to cash values and the conversion of what was originally a means into an absolute end. Proliferation of consumable products elevated consumerism to a dominant place in life.

The economic system that lay behind all these developments was faulted, by Marx and his followers, for a number of noxious effects. These include a base line of chronic unemployment, the instability of cyclical booms and busts in the economy, growing inequality between the top and bottom levels of the income hierarchy, and fragmentation of the community into a plethora of narrow economic interests. Individuation has also been associated with a number of modern ills, including swollen suicide rates (Durkheim), increased loneliness and anxiety (Slater), and reduced public engagement (Sennett) and social capital (Putnam).

Transformations associated with political democratization entailed other disadvantages. Enfranchisement of the masses led to less informed policy decisions. It caused vulnerability to demagogues, with the possibility of introducing despotic regimes. It also entailed the tyranny of the majority, with attendant suppression of minority views. Tocqueville not only warned of these costs, he also regretted the loss of liberties of towns and parishes attendant on centralization. He and others (Sapir) warned about the consequent erosion of local peculiarities and cultures. Still others have emphasized the violence inherent in processes of political modernization, including the revolutionary violence that accompanied the formation of modern states (Moore), the inflammation of hostilities among primordial groups (Geertz), and a general propensity for violence inherent in modern political formations (Eisenstadt 1996, Joas 2003).

The institution of universal rights was viewed with less apprehension than the other features of modernity, except by bigots and those with parochial interests to protect. Even so, the leveling it entailed evoked concerns in some quarters. Tocqueville criticized the lowered quality of those who became political leaders under egalitarian conditions as well as the basement of cultural standards. Ortega faulted the new egalitarian regime for producing many fewer people who were willing to assume the burdens of public leadership and maintaining standards for cultural productions.

The psychic malaise attendant on disciplinary revolution was famously analyzed by Freud, who authored the text that inspired the title of this paper. Freud argued that the control of drives needed for the work of civilization exacted pathogenic levels of psychic costs. Weber scored the repressive consequences of discipline in both factories and bureaucracies. Mannheim believed that the rationalized control of drives in modern society was producing persons less capable of independent thought and thereby prey to demagoguery. Foucault's position on this question is more ambiguous, but he has been read as arguing that the modern extension of disciplinary processes involves an unprecedented diminution of human freedom.

The rationalization of culture constitutes a highly complex phenomenon, which cannot be explicated here. One discontent was famously articulated by Simmel, with his notion of the tragedy of culture. For Simmel, modernity was marked by the accelerated production of "objective culture," all those forms of symbolic work such as science, art, music, philosophy, and the like. This enormous output took place at the expense of subjective culture, that is, of the capacity of human subjects to engage and digest those objective forms for the sake of their personal growth. As a result, he said, modern man feels himself in a typically problematic situation—

his sense of being surrounded by an innumerable number of cultural elements which are neither meaningless to him nor, in the final analysis, meaningful. In their mass they depress him, since he is not capable of assimilating them all, nor

---

<sup>7</sup> Smith's critiques were echoed by his Scottish compatriots Adam Ferguson and John Millar, writers generally known for championing the new commercial order. As one commentator put it, the three of them looked at the dark side of the medal of modern civilization, and saw "the paradox of the progress of commerce and manufactures . . . inevitably producing a second-rate sort of society full of second-rate citizens pursuing comparatively worthless objects" (Ferguson 1966, xii).

can he simply reject them, since after all they do belong *potentially* within the sphere of his cultural development. (Simmel 1968, 44)

In some exceptionally insightful and provocative analyses, Eisenstadt (1996) has focused on value-rationalization as the central hallmark of modernity. The attempt to reconstruct society forcibly in accord with articulated ideals has produced a Jacobin mentality responsible for much of the barbarism of totalitarian regimes of the past two centuries, leading to mass annihilations on the basis of adherence to utopian ideologies.

TALCOTT PARSONS AND THE ANATOMY OF MODERNITY

In assessing the work of Talcott Parsons (or any other major thinker), it is important always to hold in mind the distinction that Jeffrey Alexander drew long ago (1983)—between what can be done within Parsons's theoretical system and what the author himself has done with it. Although Parsons himself did not identify all of the features and benefits of modernity that we have surveyed thus far, nor did he treat many of the discontents extensively if at all, his conceptual framework enables us to classify, interpret, and relate a great number, if not all, of them. Figure 4 suggests a way to relate the central processes and benefits of modernity noted above to concepts from the action theory framework.

Figure 4. THE HALLMARKS OF MODERNITY IN ACTION THEORY TERMS

Key feature	Differentiation		Unification	Equalization	Disciplining	Cultural Rationalization
	Individual/Social Functional					
Benefits	Personal freedom	Commerce	Efficacy	Justice	Civility	Knowledge
System Function	Personality diff. From social systems	Soc. system-A Economy	Soc. System-G Polity	Soc. system-I Jural Community	Soc. system-L "Schooling"	Cultural systems diff. from social systems

Because it insists on a schema that is both highly differentiated and logically integrative, Parsonian theory offers an exceptional basis for a systematic diagnostic overview. Indeed, instead of proceeding inductively as this paper was presented, one could work to derive a paradigm of issues from the parameters of action theory deductively. This is what we find in the germinal formulations of Frank Lechner and Paul Colomy (from the book of essays edited by Alexander in 1985, *Neofunctionalism*). Taking the master notion of differentiation within action systems, they delineate structured strains that emerge simply from its secular progression. Lechner points to the multiple sources of tension that the very process of systemic differentiation itself engenders. For one thing, he notes that structural change in itself causes discontents. For another, he lays out a paradigm of discontents that inhere in the processes of value generalization, inclusion, individuation, and adaptive upgrading. Colomy points to the structured strains engendered both by processes of *uneven* development *across* institutional sectors and by variations in the rates and degrees of differentiation *within* institutional sectors.

Beyond those parameters, I would point to a number of discontents that arise from tensions among the different functional subsystems, tensions that Parsons paid at least modest attention to over decades:

the tension between the discipline in work needed in modern occupations and the hedonistic emphasis in the consumerism of commercial society (Bell 1973, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*);

the tension between the adaptive interest in efficiency and the jural interest in universalistic procedural norms (Levine on Weber on bureaucracy);

the tension between the dispositions that make the market system work and those needed for mobilization on behalf of public projects (the famous freeloader dilemma);

the tension between the critical distancing essential to science and the commitments needed for civic action (Simmel on money, Goldfarb 1991 on the cynical society);  
the tension between rationalized culture and individuation (Simmel, as above).

One could go on. I can imagine dozens of such tensions being identified through systematic attention to intra- and inter-systemic strains. More than enough has been said to demonstrate the fruitfulness of using the concepts of the Parsonian action schema for this purpose.

Even so, the discontents spotted through the lens of action theory are far from exhausting what might be listed in a complete catalogue of modern ills. I find two sets of discontents that lie outside the framework of action theory. One set pertains to problems in the non-human environment that have become so salient in recent years: pollution of air and water; destruction of species; erosion of soil; ozone depletion in the troposphere; despoliation of landscapes. Although these phenomena have resulted from human action, they take place across the boundary between action and its environments—a phenomenal universe encompassed by the paradigm of the human condition, but not of the action paradigm by itself.

A related set of omissions has to do with the extent to which an action-theoretic approach to sociology truncates the range of commonplace social phenomena that get attended to. I refer here to the substratum of material bodies through which social actions are carried out. By defining the social domain in terms of institutionalized norms and the boundary-maintaining systems that they delineate, Parsons has cut his sociology off from what Durkheim called social morphology, and what Robert Park counterposed to the moral order—the ecological order. More concretely, this would have to do with demographic trends—birth and death rates, morbidity rates, migration patterns—and ecological phenomena—urbanization, suburbanization, traffic patterns, and the like. Developments in these domains associated with modernity—the demographic revolution and the urban revolution—must surely be included in any thorough inventory of its discontents.

The final chapter of this discourse would consist of a search for responses to these discontents, actual or imaginable. It might be worthwhile to outline the range of equilibrating and transforming processes that Parsons and others have examined. In a subsequent publication, I expect to discuss a series of initiatives by educators in response to these problems.<sup>8</sup>

## MODERNITY IN THE GLOBAL ERA

Recent critiques of the modernization literature have focused on the changed realities attendant on our increasingly globalized era. One thesis, represented most vocally by Martin Albrow (1997), urges us to abandon the term “modernity” altogether. Albrow argues that while it was appropriate to use the term Modern to designate the epoch of the past few centuries, that epoch has now ended, and we have entered a new one, which he calls *The Global Age*.

The thesis is arresting and warrants a considered response. My response is twofold. On the one hand, the burden of proof would have to be on whoever argues that the five revolutionary processes described above are no longer significantly operative in the contemporary global world. Clearly, that is not the case. Each of them simply has continued to manifest itself on a wider stage.

On the other hand, globalization began centuries ago, and contemporary globalities simply continue all of the processes identified above. As Marx and Engels observed in the late 1840s, already the expansion of commerce under capitalism had brought about the universal interdependence of nations, and the extension of intellectual creations had produced a world literature. Late in the World War which he initially championed, Simmel forecast a supranational European community. Durkheim and G. H. Mead analyzed processes that were promoting international-mindedness. Even so, I see no objection to referring to the contemporary period as a Global Age, and some advantages in doing so. The point is not to

---

<sup>8</sup> Dialogical analysis of those remedies will appear in my forthcoming book, *Habits of the Mind: The Reinvention of Liberal Learning*.

prolong usage of the term modernity at all costs, but to be clear about what the actual historic processes consist of.

The other thesis affirms the continued aptness of using “modernity” for the contemporary period, but insists that modernity can no longer be taken to signify a unific complex. Instead, it must be understood to have multiple manifestations—that there are in fact “multiple modernities.”

Here, too, it would be instructive to recall a number of earlier analyses, especially from the ill-reputed modernization literature of the 1960’s. Most of those writings were well aware that the core processes of modernization would be realized differently according to the varying cultural and social-structural backgrounds of the nations in question. One thinks of Geertz’s classification of a half-dozen different configurations of the integrative revolution; Fallers’s contrast of the ways in which the modernization of stratification-systems would differ among Western societies, India, the Islamic world, and Sub-Saharan Africa; or Cyril Black’s pronouncement that modernizing societies find themselves “in the process of seeking their own formulas of political modernization” (Weiner, ed. 1966, 20).

As noted above, Parsons built into his conception of the system of modern societies the assumption that different countries would configure their modernity profile in different ways. Richard Münch (2001) has pursued this line of thought with exceptional fruitfulness, indicating the very different modes of ethical transformation manifested by England, France, Germany, and the United States (although his own forecast is that sooner or later, the American pattern of balanced interpenetration between ethics and world will develop in all modern societies.)

Even so robust a proponent of the notion of multiple modernities as Shmuel Eisenstadt must assert a common core of all modernizing societies, even if its contents are colored differently. For Eisenstadt, this core consists of the effort to remake the world in accord with some sort of ideal program. To say this is to say that a core attribute of modernity is the instantiation of a high level of value-rationality. This means that fundamentalist movements and societies are eminently “modern,” in so far as they are geared to pursue such a program. The problem with a formula like “multiple modernities” is that it systematically neglects to represent the whole range of other processes that are constitutive of modernity besides value-rationality, that is, functional specialization, individualization, political mobilization, normative universalism, new forms of discipline, and the rationalization of other cultural systems.

If what I have said makes sense, then perhaps we might reconsider what needs to be said regarding the Human Condition in the modern era. This era has been marked by revolutions of many kinds, along lines that ushered in enormous benefits, yet which have also produced a wide range of unanticipated disadvantages. If to use the term Modernity means to imagine that we inhabit an ever-improving epoch in a self-congratulatory state of mind, then perhaps we should follow the advice of analysts like Albrow and Stehr who counsel us to stop using the term. But if we link our analyses with those of the past two centuries and more by theorists of modernity who viewed the modernizing revolutions as producing unprecedented problems and challenges, and recast our image of modernity not as a destination but as a complex process of endless growth, problems, and challenges, then perhaps we can secure a more grounded, more inclusive dialogue about its central features and challenges. In such an effort, the pioneering ideas and insights of Talcott Parsons might stand us in good stead.

## REFERENCES

- Albrow, Martin. 1997. *The Global Age: State and Society Beyond Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey. 1983. *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey, ed. 1985. *Neofunctionalism*. Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications.
- Bell, Daniel. 1976. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Camic, Charles. 1983. *Experience and Enlightenment: Socialization for Cultural Change in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Colomy, Paul. 1985. "Uneven Structural Differentiation: Toward a Comparative Approach." In Alexander, ed., 131-56.
- Comte, Auguste. 1969 [1839]. *Cours de la Philosophie Positive*. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Paris: Editions Anthropos.
- Eisenstadt, S. N. 1996. "Barbarism and Modernity." *Society* 33 (May/June), 31-39.
- , 1999. *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution: The Jacobin Dimension of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- , 2000. "Multiple Modernities." *Daedalus* 129:1 (Winter), 1-29.
- Elias, Norbert. 2000 [1936]. *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Trans. E. Jephcott. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Ferguson, Adam. 1966 [1767]. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Ed. Duncan Forbes. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1979 [1975]. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books.
- Goldfarb, Jeffrey. 1991. *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gorski, Philip. 1993. "The Protestant Ethic Revisited: Disciplinary Revolution in Holland and Prussia." *American Journal of Sociology*, 99:2 (Sept.), 265-316.
- Gould, Mark. 1991. "The Structure of Social Action: at least Sixty Years Ahead of its Time." In *Talcott Parsons: Theorist of Modernity*, edited by Roland Robertson and Bryan S. Turner. London: SAGE Publications.
- Hennis, Wilhelm. 1988. *Max Weber, Essays in Reconstruction*. Trans. Keith Tribe. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Jencks, Christopher, and David Riesman. 1968. *The Academic Revolution*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Lechner, Frank. 1985. "Modernity and Its Discontents." In Alexander, ed., 157-76.
- Levine, Donald N. 1995. *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mead, G. H. 1929. "National-Mindedness and International-Mindedness." *International Journal of Ethics* 39, 385-407.
- Münch, Richard. 2001. *The Ethics of Modernity*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Parsons, Talcott. 1961. Introduction to: Spencer, Herbert. *The Study of Society*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- , 1964. "Evolutionary Universals in Society." *American Sociological Review* 29: 339-57.
- , 1977. *The Evolution of Societies*. Ed. Jackson Toby. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Redfield, Robert. 1941. *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Simmel, Georg. 1989 [1890]. *Über soziale Differenzierung*. In: *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe 2* Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.
- , 1968. *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*. Trans. Peter Etkorn. New York: Teachers College Press.
- , 1971. *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Ed. D. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Adam. 1976 [1776]. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stehr, Nico. 2001. *The Fragility of Modern Societies*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Thomas, W. I. 1923. *The Unadjusted Girl*. Boston: Little Brown and Company.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. 1933. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: Macmillan.
- Williams, Raymond. 1983. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Revised ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wittrock, Björn. 2000. "Modernity: One, None, or Many? European Origins and Modernity as a Global Condition." *Daedalus* 129:1 (Winter), 31-60.