Where is Home?

Modernity & Emptiness

John Zerzan

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Acknowledging the existence only of individuals and families, Margaret Thatcher declared, "There's no such thing as society."

Mustafa Khayati went a little deeper, in one of my favorite quotes: "The university teaches everything about society. Except what it is." Similarly, Peter Sloterdijk wondered what kind of "proverbial stuff" societies are made of.

How to pose such general questions with some focus and depth, when darkness has swept over contemporary social life? How is it that modern life, the "fully enlightened earth," has come to "radiate disaster triumphant," as Horkheimer and Adorno asked several decades ago?

Everyone knows that we can't go back, can't forsake modernity. But it has forsaken us and the rest of earthly species. Are we to stand for that? "Today it would be an understatement," Richard Wohlin wrote in *Labyrinth* (1993), "to claim that the legacy of modernity has fallen under suspicion; in truth, it has fallen victim to a frontal assault from all quarters."

Modern life began its conquest of the world in the 1600s, not much past the Middle Ages, and is now well into its demise at every level, for all to see. In recent decades, modernity is marked by declining confidence and energy, withdrawal from life and connection, and increasing violence, as social systems coalesce and reinforce authority and control. As Pico Iyer noted in *Global Soul* (2001), people worldwide increasingly dress the same, behave the same, in apartments, airports, schools, prisons that look the same.

Marx saw that modernity issues mainly from modern production systems. Mass production produces mass society mass culture. Hardly a radical finding. J.H. Randall's mainstream *Our Changing Civilization* (1926) described how "machine production was destined to transform the face of Western society… the machine has brought its own world with it." And, modern city life brings new needs and problems that only more machines promise to satisfy, while community is steadily erased.

Max Weber, too, deemed the purely technical modernity's decisive factor. Lukacs, Gramsci, and Ellul viewed technological rationality as primary to the ruling ideology, displacing public spaces and human interaction. Technology imposes its own agenda.

In the Dataverse, information technology is central to modernity's movement, the pace of the Machine, its capacity for manipulation and dominance. But as Manuel Castello argues in *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), modernity is not at base a case of technological determinism, rather, technology is society.

New information and communication modes are radically transforming our personal, social, and political lives in the algorithmic condition of digitized society. Shifting dynamics and priorities of the concept of knowledge were laid bare by Foucault: the disintegration and ritualization of experience, the absorption of life by the dominant modern techno-order. Modernity is revealing itself in accelerated fashion.

But, it's also clear that at modernity's very beginnings, major changes were afoot. Early in the 17th century, a kind of turning point seems to have been reached: a movement away from popular or folk culture, with less to draw on from such sources. And, less to adduce from tragedy, with the marked decline of the tragic hero.

John Donne wrote *An Anatomy of the World* in 1611 to commemorate Elizabeth Drury. Among its lines:

"The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit

"Can well direct him where to look for it…

"For every man alone thinks he hath got

"To be a phoenix, and that then can be

"None of that kind, of which he is, but he."

Not the time of heroic quest, rather of Don Quixote's quixotic delusions (1605) and King Lear's madness (1611). Yet in *The Tempest* (also 1611), Shakespeare depicted Prospero going against the rebel savage Caliban, while also portraying the anti-authoritarian primitivist, Gonzalo.

About two hundred years later, in the early 19th century, Hegel was the first philosopher for whom modernity became a problem. Around the same time, Lord Byron, flamboyant poet, became the first pop star, the first to receive fan mail.

How this phenomenon has grown since, to today's in fluencers, bloggers, and celebrities of every stripe. Massification and mediation charged forward as industrial society expanded. Tocqueville found American conformism very pronounced in 1830. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) strove to respond to the anxieties of modernity with grounded, non-abstract analysis.

Over time, modern society has become ever more deficient and discomfiting. *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) by David Riesman et al, and Robert Putman's *Bowling Alone* (2000) deal with prevailing alienation and isolation, among many other contributions along these lines.

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) finds totalitarian outcomes as the logical culmination of political modernity. Slightly later and via several separate works, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens termed late modernity "risk society," whose members are unavoidably at risk. In his 1930s novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, Robert Musil had already demonstrated that by definition, modernity equals crisis. Or, as Dmitri Nikalin concludes in *Critique of Bored Reason* (2022), crisis is the essence of the modern subject. It is only with modernity that boredom is inescapably the prevailing mood.

In *The Fall of Public Man* (1977), Richard Sennett spoke to the loss of a sense of value and planning in public life, a condition not confined to the public spheres. Late modernity is marked by coldness, withdrawal, decontextualization, low energy. The work of Andy Warhol and the standard blank or sullen look of fashion models come to mind.

Reviewing J.C.D. Clark's *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History*, Richard Whatmore judged modernity thusly: "None has found anything at the end of their Enlightenment rainbow" (*Times Literary Supplement*, November 5, 2024).

Modernity ends as tragedy. "Only a God can save us," said Heidegger late in life. For modern philosopher Giorgio Agamben, the concentration camp is the very model of modern history: "the destiny of the West." He has called for fundamental change, without providing specifics re institutional change. Inescapable modern life?

Walter Benjamin's last work, *Thesis on History* (1940) was a plea to "shatter the reified continuity of history, as it is normally written," (Martin Jay, Force Fields, 1993). A ringing, brilliant contribution to the critique of modernity.

Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1994) lends his bit to an already fading postmodern current. It turns out that nature and culture aren't really opposed; they aren't even separate! World historian Oswald Spengler made his own blunder when he stated that modernity was a new, original, unprecedented orientation (*The Decline of the West*, 1918).

Max Weber had it right, seeing modernity as a link in the chain of the development of civilization, a logical outgrowth of the original template. The dawn of civilization, as Roy Ben-Shai grasped, was already the dawn of modernity (*Critique of Critique*, 2023).

From the ontological shift which is domination of nature, or domestication, the fatal seeds bear their fruit, from Enlightenment and industrialism to modern techno-life. Hegel said that we only learn one thing from history: that no people have ever learned from history.

At this stage of the game, though, I wonder how many can fail to understand what civilized life has brought forth.

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