# From Modern to Postmodern Social Theory (and Beyond)

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# Contemporary Theories of Modernity

## Chapter Outline

**Classical Theorists on Modernity**
**The Juggernaut of Modernity**
**The Risk Society**
**The Holocaust and Liquid Modernity**
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There is a debate raging in sociology today between those who continue to see contemporary society as a modern world and those who argue that a substantial change has taken place in recent years and that we have moved into a new, postmodern world. Chapters 15 and 17 are devoted to these two theoretical positions. In this chapter we discuss the work of contemporary representatives of those who continue to see the world in modern terms. Chapter 17 offers an overview of the ideas of some of the most important postmodern theorists.

## Classical Theorists on Modernity

Most of the classical sociologists were engaged in an analysis and critique of modern society. Such analysis is clear, for example, in the work of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel. All were working at the point of the emergence and ascendancy of modernity. While all four were well aware of the advantages of modernity, what animated their work most was a critique of the problems posed by the modern world.

For Marx, of course, modernity was defined by the capitalist economy. Marx recognized the advances brought about by the transition from earlier societies to capitalism. However, in his work Marx restricted himself largely to a critique of that economic system and its deformities (alienation, exploitation, and so on).

To Weber, the most defining problem of the modern world was the expansion of formal rationality at the expense of the other types of rationality and the resulting emergence of the iron cage of rationality. People increasingly were being imprisoned in this iron cage and, as a result, were progressively unable to express some of their most human characteristics. Of course, Weber recognized the advantages of the advance of rationalization—for example, the advantages of the bureaucracy over earlier organizational forms—but he was most concerned with the problems posed by rationalization.

In Durkheim's view, modernity was defined by its organic solidarity and the weakening of the collective conscience. Although organic solidarity brought with it greater freedom and more productivity, it also posed a series of unique problems. For example, with such a weakening of the common morality, people tended to find themselves adrift meaninglessly in the modern world. In other words, they found themselves to be suffering from anomie.

Georg Simmel, the fourth of the classical theorists, will receive a more detailed treatment here, in large part because he has been described both as a modernist (Frisby, 1992) and as a postmodernist (Jaworski, 1997; Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993). Since he fits to some degree in both categories, Simmel represents an important bridge between this chapter and Chapter 17. We deal with the case for Simmel as a modernist here; in Chapter 17 we discuss the contention that he is a postmodernist.

Frisby accepts the point of view that "Simmel is the first sociologist of modernity" (1992:59). Simmel is seen as investigating modernity primarily in two major interrelated sites—the city and the money economy. The city is where modernity is concentrated or intensified, whereas the money economy involves the diffusion of modernity, its extension (Frisby, 1992:69).

Poggi (1993) picks up the theme of modernity as it relates to money, especially in Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* (1907/1978). As Poggi sees it, three views of modernity are expressed in that work. The first is that modernization brings with it a series of advantages to human beings, especially the fact that they are able to express various potentialities that are unexpressed, concealed, and repressed in premodern society. In this sense, Simmel sees modernity "as an 'epiphany,' that is, as the express manifestation of powers intrinsic to the human species, but previously unrevealed" (Poggi, 1993:165). Second, Simmel deals with the powerful effect of money on modern society. Finally, there is Simmel's concentration on the adverse consequences of money for modernity, especially alienation. The issue of alienation brings us back to the central issue in Simmel's sociological theory in general, as well as in his sociology of modernity: the "tragedy of culture," the growing gap between objective and subjective culture, or as Simmel put it, " 'the atrophy of individual culture and the hypertrophy of objective culture' " (cited in Frisby, 1992:69).

In Frisby's view, Simmel concentrates on the "experience" of modernity. The key elements of that experience—time, space, and contingent causality—are central

aspects of at least some of the contemporary theories of modernity discussed in this chapter:

> The experience of modernity is viewed by Simmel as discontinuous of *time* as transitory, in which both the fleeting moment and the sense of presentness converge; *space* as the dialectic of distance and proximity . . . and *causality* as contingent, arbitrary and fortuitous.
>
> (Frisby, 1992:163–164)

Although it is certainly possible to view Simmel as a postmodernist, and as we will see in Chapter 17, he does seem to have more in common with postmodernists than do the other classical social theorists, the fact remains that it is at least equally appropriate to see him as a modernist. Almost certainly, the foci of much of his attention—especially the city and the money economy—are at the heart of modernity. Thus, even in the case of Simmel, and certainly in the cases of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, it is best to think of these theorists as doing sociologies of modernity.

By 1920 all four of these classical sociological theorists were dead. As we move into the twenty-first century, it is obvious that the world is a very different place than it was in 1920. Although there is great disagreement over when the postmodern age began (assuming for the moment that it did), no one puts that date before 1920. The issue is whether the changes in the world since that time are modest and continuous with those associated with modernity or are so dramatic and discontinuous that the contemporary world is better described by a new term—postmodern. That issue informs the discussion in this chapter and Chapter 17.

In this chapter we examine the thoughts of several contemporary theorists (there are many others [for example, Lefebvre, 1962/1995; Touraine, 1995; P. Wagner, 1994; E. Wood, 1997] whose work we will not have space to deal with) who in various ways and to varying degrees see the contemporary world as still best described as modern.

# The Juggernaut of Modernity

In an effort not only to be consistent with his structuration theory (see Chapter 14) but also to create an image to rival the images of classical thinkers such as Weber and his iron cage, Anthony Giddens (1990; see Mestrovic, 1998, for a bitter critique of Giddens's theory of modernity) has described the modern world (with its origins in seventeenth-century Europe) as a "juggernaut." More specifically, he is using this term to describe an advanced stage of modernity—radical, high, or late modernity. In so doing, Giddens is arguing against those who have contended that we have entered a postmodern age, although he holds out the possibility of some type of postmodernism in the future. However, while we still live in a modern age, in Giddens's view today's world is very different from the world of the classical sociological theorists.

Here is the way Giddens describes the juggernaut of modernity:

> a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control and which could rend itself asunder. The juggernaut crushes those who resist it, and while it

## ANTHONY GIDDENS

### *A Biographical Sketch*

Anthony Giddens is Great Britain's most important contemporary social theorist and one of a handful of the world's most influential theorists (Stones, 2005a). Giddens was born on January 18, 1938 (Clark, Modgil, and Modgil, 1990). He studied at the University of Hull, the London School of Economics, and the University of London. Giddens was appointed lecturer at the University of Leicester in 1961. His early work was empirical and focused on the issue of suicide. By 1969 he had moved to the position of lecturer in sociology at the prestigious Cambridge University, as well as fellow of King's College. He engaged in cross-cultural work that led to the first of his books to achieve international fame, *The Class Structure of Advanced Societies* (1975). Over the next decade or so, Giddens published a number of important theoretical works. In those works he began a step-by-step process of building his own theoretical perspective, which has come to be known as structuration theory. Those years of work culminated in 1984 with the appearance of a book, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, that constitutes the most important single statement of Giddens's theoretical perspective. In 1985 Giddens was appointed professor of sociology at the University of Cambridge.

Giddens has been a force in sociological theory for well over three decades. In addition, he has played a profound role in shaping contemporary British

sometimes seems to have a steady path, there are times when it veers away erratically in directions we cannot foresee. The ride is by no means wholly unpleasant or unrewarding; it can often be exhilarating and charged with hopeful anticipation. But, so long as the institutions of modernity endure, we shall never be able to control completely either the path or the pace of the journey. In turn, we shall never be able to feel entirely secure, because the terrain across which it runs is fraught with risks of high consequence.

(Giddens, 1990:139)

Modernity in the form of a juggernaut is extremely dynamic; it is a "'runaway world'" with great increases in the pace, scope, and profoundness of change over prior systems (Giddens, 1991:16). Giddens is quick to add that this juggernaut does not follow a single path. Furthermore, it is not of one piece but instead is made up of a number of conflicting and contradictory parts. Thus, Giddens is telling us that he is not offering an old-fashioned grand theory, or at least not a simple, unidirectional grand narrative.

The idea of a juggernaut fits nicely with structuration theory, especially with the importance in that theory of time and space. The image of a juggernaut is of something

sociology. For one thing, he has served as a consulting editor for two publishing companies—Macmillan and Hutchinson. A large number of books have been produced under his editorship. More important, he was a cofounder of Polity Press, a publisher that has been both extremely active and influential, especially in sociological theory. Giddens also has published an American-style textbook, *Sociology*, that has been a worldwide success.

As a theorist, Giddens has been highly influential in the United States, as well as in many other parts of the world. Interestingly, his work often has been less well received in his home country of Great Britain than elsewhere. This lack of acceptance at home may be attributable, in part, to the fact that Giddens has succeeded in winning the worldwide theoretical following that many other British social theorists sought and failed to achieve. As Craib says, "Giddens has perhaps realized the fantasies of many of us who committed ourselves to sociology during the period of intense and exciting debate out of which structuration theory developed" (1992:12).

Giddens's career took a series of interesting turns in the 1990s (Bryant and Jary, 2000). Several years of therapy led to a greater interest in personal life and books such as *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) and *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992). Therapy also gave him the confidence to take on a more public role and to become an adviser to British prime minister Tony Blair. In 1997 he became director of the highly prestigious London School of Economics (LSE). He strengthened the scholarly reputation of LSE as well as increased its voice in public discourse in Great Britain and around the world. There is some feeling that all this had an adverse effect on Giddens's scholarly work (his most recent books lack the depth and sophistication of his earlier works), but he is clearly focused on being a force in public life.

that is moving along *through time* and *over physical space.* However, this image does not fit well with Giddens's emphasis on the power of the agent; the image of a juggernaut seems to accord this modern mechanism far more power than it accords the agents who steer it (Mestrovic, 1998:155). This problem is consistent with the more general criticism that there is a disjunction between the emphasis on agency in Giddens's purely theoretical work and the substantive historical analyses that "point to the dominance of system tendencies against our ability to change the world" (Craib, 1992:149).

## Modernity and Its Consequences

Giddens defines modernity in terms of four basic institutions. The first is *capitalism,* characterized, familiarly, by commodity production, private ownership of capital, propertyless wage labor, and a class system derived from these characteristics. The second is *industrialism,* which involves the use of inanimate power sources and machinery to produce goods. Industrialism is not restricted to the workplace, and it affects an array of other settings, such as "transportation, communication and domestic

life" (Giddens, 1990:56). While Giddens's first two characteristics of modernity are hardly novel, the third—*surveillance capacities*—is, although it owes a debt to the work of Michel Foucault (see Chapter 17). As Giddens defines it, "Surveillance refers to the supervision of the activities of subject populations [mainly but not exclusively] in the political sphere" (1990:58). The final institutional dimension of modernity is military power, or the *control of the means of violence,* including the industrialization of war. In addition, it should be noted that in his analysis of modernity, at least at the macro level, Giddens focuses on the *nation-state* (rather than the more conventional sociological focus on society), which he sees as radically different from the type of community characteristic of premodern society.

Modernity is given dynamism by three essential aspects of Giddens's structuration theory: distanciation, disembedding, and reflexivity. The first is *time and space separation,* or *distanciation* (although this process of increasing separation, like all aspects of Giddens's work, is not unilinear; it is dialectical). In premodern societies, time was always linked with space and the measurement of time was imprecise. With modernization, time was standardized and the close linkage between time and space was broken. In this sense, both time and space were "emptied" of content; no particular time or space was privileged; they became pure forms. In premodern societies, space was defined largely by physical presence and therefore by localized spaces. With the coming of modernity, space is progressively torn from place. Relationships with those who are physically absent and increasingly distant become more and more likely. To Giddens, place becomes increasingly "phantasmagoric"; that is, "locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them . . . the 'visible form' of the locale conceals the distanciated relations which determine its nature" (Giddens, 1990:19).

Time and space distanciation is important to modernity for several reasons. First, it makes possible the growth of rationalized organizations such as bureaucracies and the nation-state, with their inherent dynamism (in comparison to premodern forms) and their ability to link local and global domains. Second, the modern world is positioned within a radical sense of world history, and it is able to draw upon that history to shape the present. Third, such distanciation is a major prerequisite for Giddens's second source of dynamism in modernity—disembedding.

As Giddens defines it, *disembedding* involves "the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space" (1990:21). There are two types of disembedding mechanisms that play a key role in modern societies; both can be included under the heading "abstract systems." The first is *symbolic tokens,* the best known of which is money. Money allows for time-space distanciation—we are able to engage in transactions with others who are widely separated from us by time and/or space. The second is *expert systems,* defined as "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today" (Giddens, 1990:27). The most obvious expert systems involve professionals such as lawyers and physicians, but everyday phenomena such as our cars and homes are created and affected by expert systems. Expert systems provide guarantees (but not without risks) of performance across time and space.

Trust is very important in modern societies dominated by abstract systems and with great time-space distanciation. The need for trust is related to this distanciation: "We have no need to trust someone who is constantly in view and whose activities can be directly monitored" (Giddens, 1991:19). Trust becomes necessary when, as a result of increasing distanciation in terms of either time or place, we no longer have full information about social phenomena (Craib, 1992:99). Trust is defined "as confidence in the reliability of a person or systems, regarding a given set of outcomes or events, where that confidence expresses a faith in the probity or love of another, or in the correctness of abstract principles (technical knowledge)" (Giddens, 1990:34). Trust is of great importance not only in modern society in general, but also to the symbolic tokens and expert systems that serve to disembed life in the modern world. For example, in order for the money economy and the legal system to work, people must have trust in them.

The third dynamic characteristic of modernity is its *reflexivity*. Reflexivity is a fundamental feature of Giddens's structuration theory (as well as of human existence, in his view), but it takes on special meaning in modernity, where "social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character" (Giddens, 1990:38). Everything is open to reflection in the modern world, including reflection itself, leaving us with a pervasive sense of uncertainty. Furthermore, the problem of the double hermeneutic (see Chapter 14) recurs here because the reflection of experts on the social world tends to alter that world.

The disembedded character of modern life raises a number of distinctive issues. One is the need for trust in abstract systems in general, and expert systems in particular. In one of his more questionable metaphors, Giddens sees children as being "inoculated" with a "dosage" of trust during childhood socialization. This aspect of socialization serves to provide people with a "protective cocoon," which, as they mature into adulthood, helps give them a measure of ontological security and trust. This trust tends to be buttressed by the series of routines that we encounter on a day-to-day basis. However, there are new and dangerous risks associated with modernity that always threaten our trust and threaten to lead to pervasive ontological insecurity. As Giddens sees it, while the disembedding mechanisms have provided us with security in various areas, they also have created a distinctive "risk profile." Risk is global in intensity (nuclear war can kill us all) and in the expansion of contingent events that affect large numbers of people around the world (for example, changes in the worldwide division of labor). Then there are risks traceable to our efforts to manage our material environment. Risks also stem from the creation of institutional risk environments such as global investment markets. People are increasingly aware of risks, and religion and customs are increasingly less important as ways of believing that those risks can be transformed into certainties. A wide range of publics are now likely to know of the risks we face. Finally, there is a painful awareness that expert systems are limited in their ability to deal with these risks. It is these risks that give modernity the feeling of a runaway juggernaut and fill us with ontological insecurity.

What has happened? Why are we suffering the negative consequences of being aboard the juggernaut of modernity? Giddens suggests several reasons. The first is

*design faults* in the modern world; those who designed elements of the modern world made mistakes. The second is *operator failure;* the problem is traceable not to the designers but to those who run the modern world. Giddens, however, gives prime importance to two other factors—*unintended consequences* and *reflexivity of social knowledge.* That is, the consequences of actions for a system can never be forecast fully, and new knowledge is continually sending systems off in new directions. For all these reasons, we cannot completely control the juggernaut, the modern world.

However, rather than giving up, Giddens suggests the seemingly paradoxical course of *utopian realism.* That is, he seeks a balance between utopian ideals and the realities of life in the modern world. He also accords importance to the role social movements can play in dealing with some of the risks of the modern world and pointing us toward a society in which those risks are ameliorated.

Giddens's (1994) effort to find a compromise political position is manifest in the title of one of his later books, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics.* With extant political positions moribund, Giddens proposes a reconstituted "radical politics" based on utopian realism and oriented toward addressing the problems of poverty, environmental degradation, arbitrary power and force, and violence in social life. Giddens's political position involves an acceptance of at least some aspects of capitalism (e.g., markets) and rejection of many aspects of socialism (e.g., a revolutionary subject). Thus Giddens has chosen to walk a very narrow and difficult political tightrope.

Given his views on modernity, where does Giddens stand on postmodernity? For one thing, he rejects most, if not all, of the tenets we usually associate with postmodernism. For example, of the idea that systematic knowledge is impossible, Giddens says that such a view would lead us "to repudiate intellectual activity altogether" (1990:47). However, although he sees us as living in an era of high modernity, Giddens believes it is possible now to gain a glimpse of postmodernity. Such a world would, in his view, be characterized by a postscarcity system, increasingly multilayered democratization, demilitarization, and the humanization of technology. However, there are clearly no guarantees that the world will move in the direction of some, to say nothing of all, of these postmodern characteristics. Yet, reflexively, Giddens believes that in writing about such eventualities he (and others) can play a role in helping them come to pass.

# Modernity and Identity

*The Consequences of Modernity* is a largely macro-oriented work, whereas *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Giddens, 1991) focuses more on the micro aspects of late modernity, especially the self. Although Giddens certainly sees the self as dialectically related to the institutions of modern society, most of his attention here is devoted to the micro end of the continuum. We, too, will focus here on the micro issues, but we should not lose sight of the larger dialectic:

> Transformations in self-identity and globalisation . . . are the two poles of the
> dialectic of the local and the global in conditions of high modernity. Changes in
> intimate aspects of personal life . . . are directly tied to the establishment of social

connections of very wide scope . . . for the first time in human history, "self" and "society" are interrelated in a global milieu.

<div align="right">(Giddens, 1991:32)</div>

As we have seen, Giddens defines the modern world as reflexive, and he argues that the "reflexivity of modernity extends into the core of the self . . . the self becomes a *reflexive project*" (1991:32). That is, the self comes to be something to be reflected upon, altered, even molded. Not only does the individual become responsible for the creation and maintenance of the self, but this responsibility is continuous and all-pervasive. The self is a product both of self-exploration and of the development of intimate social relationships. In the modern world, even the body gets "drawn into the reflexive organisation of social life" (Giddens, 1991:98). We are responsible for the design not only of our selves but also (and relatedly) that of our bodies. Central to the reflexive creation and maintenance of the self are the appearance of the body and its appropriate demeanor in a variety of settings and locales. The body is also subject to a variety of "regimes" (for example, diet and exercise books) that not only help individuals mold their bodies but also contribute to self-reflexivity as well as to the reflexivity of modernity in general. The result, overall, is an obsession with our bodies and our selves within the modern world.

The modern world brings with it the *"sequestration of experience,"* or the "connected processes of concealment which set apart the routines of ordinary life from the following phenomena: madness; criminality; sickness and death; sexuality; and nature" (Giddens, 1991:149, 156). Sequestration occurs as a result of the growing role of abstract systems in everyday life. This sequestration brings us greater ontological security, but at the cost of the "exclusion of social life from fundamental existential issues which raise central moral dilemmas for human beings" (Giddens, 1991:156).

While modernity is a double-edged sword, bringing both positive and negative developments, Giddens perceives an underlying "looming threat of *personal meaninglessness*" (1991:201). All sorts of meaningful things have been sequestered from daily life; they have been repressed. However, dialectically, increasing self-reflexivity leads to the increasing likelihood of the return of that which has been repressed. Giddens sees us moving into a world in which "on a collective level and in day-to-day life moral/existential questions thrust themselves back to centre-stage" (1991:208). The world beyond modernity, for Giddens, is a world characterized by "remoralization." Those key moral and existential issues that have been sequestered will come to occupy center stage in a society that Giddens sees as being foreshadowed, and anticipated, in the self-reflexivity of the late modern age.

## Modernity and Intimacy

Giddens picks up many of these themes in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992). In this work he focuses on ongoing transformations of intimacy that show movement toward another important concept in Giddens's thinking about the modern world—the *pure relationship,* or "a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver

enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (Giddens, 1992:58). In the case of intimacy, a pure relationship is characterized by emotional communication with self and other in a context of sexual and emotional equality. The democratization of intimate relationships can lead to the democratization not only of interpersonal relations in general but of the macro-institutional order as well. The changing nature of intimate relations, in which women ("the emotional revolutionaries of modernity" [Giddens, 1992:130]) have taken the lead and men have been "laggards," has revolutionary implications for society as a whole.

In the modern world intimacy and sexuality (and, as we have seen, much else) have been sequestered. However, while this sequestration was liberating in various senses from intimacy in traditional societies, it is also a form of repression. The reflexive effort to create purer intimate relationships must be carried out in a context separated from larger moral and ethical issues. However, this modern arrangement comes under pressure as people, especially women, attempt reflexive construction of themselves and others. Thus Giddens is arguing not for sexual liberation or pluralism but rather for a larger ethical and moral change, a change that he sees as already well under way in intimate relationships:

> We have no need to wait around for a sociopolitical revolution to further programmes of emancipation, nor would such a revolution help very much. Revolutionary processes are already well under way in the infrastructure of personal life. The transformation of intimacy presses for psychic as well as social change and such change, going "from the bottom up," could potentially ramify through other, more public, institutions.
>
> Sexual emancipation, I think, can be the medium of a wide-ranging emotional reorganisation of social life.
>
> (Giddens, 1992:181–182)

# The Risk Society

We have already touched on the issue of risk in Giddens's work on modernity. As Giddens says,

> Modernity is a risk culture. I do not mean by this that social life is inherently more risky than it used to be; for most people that is not the case. Rather, the concept of risk becomes fundamental to the way both lay actors and technical specialists organise the social world. Modernity reduces the overall riskiness of certain areas and modes of life, yet at the same time introduces new risk parameters largely or completely unknown to previous eras.
>
> (Giddens, 1991:3–4)

Thus, Giddens (1991:28) describes as "quite accurate" the thesis of the work to be discussed in this section: Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992; Bora, 2007; Bronner, 1995 Then, 2007).

In terms of this discussion, the subtitle of Beck's work is of great importance because it indicates that Beck, like Giddens, rejects the notion that we have moved into a postmodern age. Rather, in Beck's view we continue to exist in the modern

world, albeit in a new form of modernity. The prior, "classical" stage of modernity was associated with industrial society, whereas the emerging new modernity and its technologies are associated with the risk society (N. Clark, 1997). Although we do not yet live in a risk society, we no longer live only in an industrial society; that is, the contemporary world has elements of both. In fact, the risk society can be seen as a type of industrial society, because many of those risks are traceable to industry. Beck offers the following overview of his perspective:

> *Just as modernization dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century and produced the industrial society, modernization today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being. . . .* The thesis of this book is: we are witnessing not the end but the beginning of modernity—that is, of a modernity *beyond* its classical industrial design.
>
> (Beck, 1992:10)

What, then, is this new modernity? And what is the risk society that accompanies it?

Beck labels the new, or better yet newly emerging, form *reflexive modernity* (Zinn, 2007a). A process of individualization has taken place in the West. That is, agents are becoming increasingly free of structural constraints and are, as a result, better able to reflexively create not only themselves but also the societies in which they live. For example, instead of being determined by their class situations, people operate more or less on their own. Left to their own devices, people have been forced to be more reflexive. Beck makes the case for the importance of reflexivity in the example of social relationships in such a world: "The newly formed social relationships and social networks now have to be individually chosen; social ties, too, are becoming *reflexive,* so that they have to be established, maintained, and constantly renewed by individuals" (1992:97).

Beck sees a break within modernity and a transition from classical industrial society to the risk society, which, while different from its predecessor, continues to have many of the characteristics of industrial society. The central issue in classical modernity was wealth and how it could be distributed more evenly. In advanced modernity the central issue is risk and how it can be prevented, minimized, or channeled. In classical modernity the ideal was equality, whereas in advanced modernity it is safety. In classical modernity people achieved solidarity in the search for the positive goal of equality, but in advanced modernity the attempt to achieve that solidarity is found in the search for the largely negative and defensive goal of being spared from dangers.

## Creating the Risks

The risks are, to a large degree, being produced by the sources of wealth in modern society. Specifically, industry and its side effects are producing a wide range of hazardous, even deadly, consequences for society and, as a result of globalization (Featherstone, 1990; Robertson, 1992), for the world as a whole. Using the concepts of time and space, Beck makes the point that these modern risks are not restricted to place (a nuclear accident in one geographical locale could affect many other nations) or time (a nuclear accident could have genetic effects that might affect future generations).

While social class is central in industrial society and risk is fundamental to the risk society, risk and class are not unrelated. Says Beck,

> The history of risk distribution shows that, like wealth, risks adhere to the class pattern, only inversely: wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom. To that extent, risks seem to *strengthen,* not to abolish, class society. Poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks. By contrast, the wealthy (in income, power, or education) can purchase safety and freedom from risk.
>
> (Beck, 1992:35)

What is true for social classes is also true for nations. That is, to the degree that it is possible, risks are centered in poor nations, while the rich nations are able to push many risks as far away as possible. Further, the rich nations profit from the risks they produce by, for example, producing and selling technologies that help prevent risks from occurring or deal with their adverse effects once they do occur.

However, neither wealthy individuals nor the nations that produce risks are safe from risks. In this context, Beck discusses what he calls the "boomerang effect," whereby the side effects of risk "strike back even at the centers of their production. The agents of modernization themselves are emphatically caught in the maelstrom of hazards that they unleash and profit from" (1992:37).

## Coping with the Risks

Although advanced modernization produces the risks, it also produces the reflexivity that allows it to question itself and the risks it produces. In fact, it is often the people themselves, the victims of the risks, who begin to reflect on those risks. They begin to observe and to collect data on the risks and their consequences for people. They become experts who come to question advanced modernity and its dangers. They do this, in part, because they can no longer rely on scientists to do it for them. Indeed, Beck is very hard on scientists for their role in the creation and maintenance of the risk society: "Science has become the *protector of a global contamination of people and nature.* In that respect, it is no exaggeration to say that in the way they deal with risks in many areas, the sciences *have squandered until further notice their historic reputation for rationality*" (1992:70).

In classical industrial society nature and society were separated, but in advanced industrial society nature and society are deeply intertwined. That is, changes in society often affect the natural environment, and those changes, in turn, affect society. Thus, according to Beck, today "nature *is* society and society is also '*nature*'" (1992:80). Thus nature has been politicized, with the result that natural scientists, like social scientists, have had their work politicized.

The traditional domain of politics, the government, is losing power because the major risks are emanating from what Beck calls "sub politics," for example, large companies, scientific laboratories, and the like. It is in the subpolitical system that "the structures of a new society are being implemented with regard to the ultimate goals of progress in knowledge, outside the parliamentary system, not in opposition to it, but simply ignoring it" (Beck, 1992:223). This is part of what he calls the "unbinding of politics," where politics is no longer left to the central government, but

increasingly is becoming the province of various subgroups, as well as of individuals. These subgroups and individuals can be more reflexive and self-critical than a central government can, and they have the capability to reflect upon, to better deal with, the array of risks associated with advanced modernity. Thus, dialectically, advanced modernity has generated both unprecedented risks and unprecedented efforts to deal with those risks (Beck, 1996).

# The Holocaust and Liquid Modernity

To Zygmunt Bauman (1989, 1991) the modern paradigm of formal rationality is the Holocaust, the systematic destruction of the Jews (and others) by the Nazis (Beilharz, 2005c, 2005d). As Bauman puts it, "Considered as a complex purposeful operation, the Holocaust may serve as a paradigm of modern bureaucratic rationality" (1989:149). To many it will seem obscene to discuss fast-food restaurants and the Holocaust in the same context. Yet there is a clear line in sociological thinking about modern rationality from the bureaucracy to the Holocaust and then to the fast-food restaurant. Weber's principles of rationality can be applied usefully and meaningfully to each. The perpetrators of the Holocaust employed the bureaucracy as one of their major tools. The conditions that made the Holocaust possible, especially the formally rational system, continue to exist today. Indeed, what the process of rationalization indicates is not only that formally rational systems persist, but that they are expanding dramatically. Thus, in Bauman's view, under the right set of circumstances the modern world would be ripe for an even greater abomination (if such a thing is possible) than the Holocaust.

## A Product of Modernity

Rather than viewing the Holocaust, as most do, as an abnormal event, Bauman sees it as in many ways a "normal" aspect of the modern, rational world:

> The truth is that every "ingredient" of the Holocaust—all of those many things that rendered it possible—was normal; "normal" not in the sense of the familiar . . . but in the sense of being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world.
>
> (Bauman, 1989:8)

Thus, the Holocaust, to Bauman, was a product of modernity and *not,* as most people view it, a result of the breakdown of modernity or a special route taken within it (Joas, 1998; Varcoe, 1998). In Weberian terms, there was an "elective affinity" between the Holocaust and modernity.

For example, the Holocaust involved the application of the basic principles of industrialization in general, and the factory system in particular, to the destruction of human beings:

> [Auschwitz] was also a mundane extension of the modern factory system. Rather than producing goods, the raw material was human beings and the end-product was death, so many units per day marked carefully on the manager's production charts.

> The chimneys, the very symbol of the modern factory system, poured forth acrid smoke produced by burning human flesh. The brilliantly organized railroad grid of modern Europe carried a new kind of raw material to the factories. It did so in the same manner as with other cargo. . . . Engineers designed the crematoria; managers designed the system of bureaucracy that worked with a zest and efficiency. . . . What we witnessed was nothing less than a massive scheme of social engineering.
>
> (Feingold, cited in Bauman, 1989:8)

What the Nazis succeeded in doing was to bring together the rational achievements of industry and the rational bureaucracy, and then bring both to bear on the objective of destroying people. Modernity, as embodied in these rational systems, was not a sufficient condition for the Holocaust, but it was clearly a necessary condition. Without modernity and rationality, "the Holocaust would be unthinkable" (Bauman, 1989:13).

## The Role of Bureaucracy

The German bureaucracy did more than carry out the Holocaust; in a very real sense it created the Holocaust. The task of "getting rid of the Jews," as Hitler defined it, was picked up by the German bureaucrats, and as they resolved a series of day-to-day problems, extermination emerged as the best means to the end as it was defined by Hitler and his henchmen. Thus, Bauman argues that the Holocaust was not the result of irrationality, or premodern barbarity, but rather it was the product of the modern, rational bureaucracy. It was not crazed lunatics who created and managed the Holocaust, but highly rational and otherwise quite normal bureaucrats.

In fact, previous efforts, such as emotional and irrational pogroms, could not have accomplished the mass extermination that characterized the Holocaust. Such a mass extermination required a highly rationalized and bureaucratized operation. An irrational outburst such as a pogrom might kill some people, but it could never successfully carry on a mass extermination of the scale undertaken in the Holocaust. As Bauman puts it, "Rage and fury are pitiably primitive and inefficient tools of mass annihilation. They normally peter out before the job is done" (1989:90). In contrast, modern genocide as it was perpetrated by the Nazis had a seemingly rational purpose, the creation of a "better" society (unfortunately, to the Nazis, a better society was one that was free of "evil" Jews). And the Nazis and their bureaucrats went about achieving that goal in a cold and methodical manner.

Unlike most observers, Bauman does not see the bureaucracy as simply a neutral tool that can be propelled in any direction. Bauman sees the bureaucracy as "more like . . . loaded dice" (1989:104). While it can be used for either cruel or humane purposes, it is more likely to favor inhuman processes: "It is programmed to measure the optimum in such terms as would not distinguish between one human object and another, or between human and inhuman objects" (Bauman, 1989:104). And given its basic characteristics, the bureaucracy would see the inhuman task through to the end, and beyond. In addition to their normal operations, bureaucracies have a number of well-known incapacities, and they too fostered the Holocaust. For example, means often become ends in bureaucracies, and in this case the means, killing, often came to be the end.

Of course, the bureaucracy and its officials could not and did not create the Holocaust on their own; other factors were required. For one thing, there was the

unquestioned control of the state apparatus with its monopoly of the means of violence over the rest of society. In other words, there were few if any countervailing power bases in Nazi Germany. And the state, of course, was controlled by Adolf Hitler, who had the ability to get the state to do his bidding. For another thing, there was a distinctly modern and rational form of anti-Semitism in which Jews were systematically set apart from the rest of society and portrayed as if they were preventing Germany from becoming a "perfect" society. To accomplish this goal, the Germans had to exterminate those who stood in the way of achieving a perfect society. German science (itself highly rationalized) was employed to help define the Jews as defective. Once they were defined as defective, and as a barrier to the perfect society, it followed that the only solution was their elimination. And once it was determined that they should be eliminated, the only important issue facing the bureaucrat was finding the most efficient way of bringing about this end.

Another factor here is that there is no place for moral considerations in modern structures such as bureaucracies. Whether it was right or wrong to exterminate the Jews was a nonissue. The absence of such moral concerns is another reason that the Holocaust is such a modern phenomenon.

## The Holocaust and Rationalization

The Holocaust had all the characteristics of Weber's rationalization process (as well as of "McDonaldization"; see Chapter 16). There was certainly an emphasis on efficiency. For example, gas was determined to be a far more efficient method of killing large numbers of people than were bullets. The Holocaust had the predictability of an assembly line, with the long lines of trains snaking into the death camps, the long rows of people winding into the "showers," and the "production" of large stacks of bodies to be disposed of at the end of the process. It was calculable in the sense that the emphasis was on quantitative factors such as how many people could be killed and in how short a time.

> For railway managers, the only meaningful articulation of their object is in terms of tonnes per kilometre. They do not deal with humans, sheep, or barbed wire; they only deal with cargo, and this means an entity consisting entirely of measurements and devoid of quality. For most bureaucrats, even such a category as cargo would mean too strict a quality-bound restriction. They deal only with the financial effects of their actions. Their object is money.
>
> (Bauman, 1989:103)

There was certainly little attention paid to the quality of the life, or even of the death, of the Jews as they marched inexorably to the gas chambers. In another, quantitative sense, the Holocaust was the most extreme of mass exterminations:

> Like everything else done in the modern—rational, planned, scientifically informed, expert, efficiently managed, co-ordinated—way, the Holocaust left behind and put to shame all its alleged pre-modern equivalents, exposing them as primitive, wasteful and ineffective by comparison. Like everything else in our modern society, the Holocaust was an accomplishment in every respect superior. . . . It towers high above the past genocidal episodes.
>
> (Bauman, 1989:89)

Finally, the Holocaust used nonhuman technologies, such as the rules and regulations of the camps and the assembly-line operation of the ovens, to control both inmates and guards.

Of course, the characteristic of rationalization (and McDonaldization) that best fits the Holocaust is the irrationality of rationality, especially dehumanization. Here Bauman makes use of the idea of distanciation to make the point that the victims can be dehumanized because the bureaucrats making decisions about them have no personal contact with them. Furthermore, the victims are objects to be moved about and disposed of, numbers on a ledger; they are not human beings. In sum, "German bureaucratic machinery was put in the service of a goal incomprehensible in its irrationality" (Bauman, 1989:136).

One of Bauman's most interesting points is that the rational system put in place by the Nazis came to encompass the victims, the Jews. The ghetto was transformed into "an extension of the murdering machine" (Bauman, 1989:23). Thus,

> the leaders of the doomed communities performed most of the preliminary bureaucratic work the operation required (supplying the Nazis with the records and keeping the files on their prospective victims), supervised the productive and distributive activities needed to keep the victims alive until the time when the gas chambers were ready to receive them, policed the captive population so that law-and-order tasks did not stretch the ingenuity or resources of the captors, secured the smooth flow of the annihilation process by appointing the objects of its successive stages, delivered the selected objects to the sites from which they could be collected with a minimum of fuss, and mobilized the financial resources needed to pay for the last journey.
>
> (Bauman, 1989:118)

(This is similar to the idea that in a McDonaldized world, the customers become unpaid workers in the system, making their own salads, cleaning up after themselves, and so on.) In "ordinary genocide," the murderers and the murdered are separated from one another. The murderers are planning to do something terrible to their victims, with the result that the resistance of potential victims is likely. However, such resistance is far less likely when the victims are an integral part of a "system" created by the perpetrators.

In their actions, the Jews who cooperated with the Nazis were behaving rationally. They were doing what was necessary to, for example, keep themselves alive for another day or be selected as people deserving of special, more favorable treatment. They were even using rational tools, such as calculating that the sacrifice of a few would save the many, and that if they didn't cooperate many more would die. However, in the end, such actions were irrational in that they helped expedite the process of genocide and reduced the likelihood of resistance to it.

Modernity has prided itself on being civilized, on having safeguards in place so that something like the Holocaust could never occur. But it did occur; the safeguards were not sufficient to prevent it. Today, the forces of rationalization remain in place and are, if anything, stronger. And there is little to suggest that the safeguards needed to prevent rationalization from running amok are any stronger today than they were in the 1940s. As Bauman says, "None of the societal conditions that made Auschwitz

possible has truly disappeared, and no effective measures have been undertaken to prevent . . . Auschwitz-like catastrophes" (1989:11). Necessary to prevent another Holocaust are a strong morality and pluralistic political forces. But there are likely to be times when a single power comes to predominate and there is little to lead us to believe that a strong enough moral system is in place to prevent another confluence of a powerful leader and an eager and willing bureaucracy.

## Liquid Modernity

More recently, Bauman has articulated a new way of looking at modernity—"liquid modernity" Atkinson, 2008; (Binkley, 2008; Bryant, 2007)—that is informed by his earlier work on rationalization and the Holocaust. Basically, the latter involved what he came to call "solid" structures such as the bureaucracy and the concentration camp (see discussion of the work of Agamben in Chapter 17), structures that contained and restricted people in various ways and to varying degrees. However, in a series of books written in the twenty-first century, Bauman (2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007a) describes a dramatic change in late modernity from such solidity to great liquidity. Basically, in early modernity the goal was to create and maintain that which was designed to be permanent (a human settlement and its settlers, a marriage), whereas in late modernity the goal becomes that which is temporary (human settlements that are more like caravan stops and the nomads who visit there, cohabitation). In early modernity, elites tended to be the most settled, entrenched in estates (perhaps with walls and guards) and engaged in lifelong careers often with lifetime employers, whereas the poor were forever on the move in search of work, greater security, and so on. Now, the situation is largely reversed as the elites seek to be as free as possible of encumbrances in order to be able to take advantages of the rapid changes taking place in the world, especially the economy. The poor, on the other hand, are largely stuck in a given place and are unable to take advantage of such changes; in fact, they are more likely to be victimized by changes in the economy and elsewhere (for example, from closed factories and lost jobs).

Bauman seeks to get at the essence of liquid modernity and its contrast to the earlier, more solid form of modernity in various ways. The earlier form can be seen as a Weberian "iron cage" (see Chapter 4); in late modernity the structures associated with such an iron cage are much more like a "light cloak" that can more easily be borne by people, especially elites on the move. Instead of the kind of solid prison dominated by the panopticon described by Foucault (see Chapter 17), we now live in a postpanopticon society characterized by much lighter forms of surveillance (for example, of our communications over the Internet). Education in early modernity involved learning all one would ever need to know early in life in school, whereas in late modernity education can take place anywhere and everywhere and is seen as a lifelong process needed to adapt to changing circumstances. Early modern society is dominated by producers and the material objects they produce in material structures (factories), whereas late modernity is characterized by consumers with their lightness and speed (Bauman 2003:49; see also, Bauman, 2007b). In fact, according to Bauman (2005:9), "Liquid life is consuming life." While producers

were oriented to creating that which would last, consumers want to buy that which has a short, limited life span. Innumerable other contrasts are made, or implied, by Bauman in his books on liquidity, but it is clear that he has produced a powerful new way of looking at the (late) modern world (we will have more to say about this in Chapter 16).

# Modernity's Unfinished Project

Jurgen Habermas is arguably not only today's leading social theorist but also the leading defender of modernity and rationality in the face of the assault on those ideas by postmodernists (and others). According to Seidman:

> In contrast to many contemporary intellectuals who have opted for an anti- or postmodernist position, Habermas sees in the institutional orders of modernity structures of rationality. Whereas many intellectuals have become cynical about the emancipatory potential of modernity . . . Habermas continues to insist on the utopian potential of modernity. In a social context in which faith in the Enlightenment project of a good society promoted by reason sees a fading hope and spurned idol, Habermas remains one of its strongest defenders.
>
> (Seidman, 1989:2)

Habermas (1987b) sees modernity as an "unfinished project," implying that there is far more to be done in the modern world before we can begin thinking about the possibility of a postmodern world (Outhwaite, 2000; Scambler, 1996).

In Chapter 14 we covered a good portion of Habermas's thinking on modernity in our discussion of his ideas on system, life-world, and the colonization of the life-world by the system. Habermas (1986:96) can be seen as doing a "theory of the pathology of modernity" because he regards modernity as being at variance with itself. By this he means that the rationality (largely formal rationality) that has come to characterize social systems is different from, and in conflict with, the rationality that characterizes the life-world. Social systems have grown increasingly complex, differentiated, integrated, and characterized by instrumental reason. The life-world, too, has witnessed increasing differentiation and condensation (but of the knowledge bases and value spheres of truth, goodness, and beauty), secularization, and institutionalization of norms of reflexivity and criticism (Seidman, 1989:24). A rational society would be one in which both system and life-world were permitted to rationalize in their own way, following their own logics. The rationalization of system and life-world would lead to a society with material abundance and control over its environments as a result of rational systems and one of truth, goodness, and beauty stemming from a rational life-world. However, in the modern world, the system has come to dominate and colonize the life-world. The result is that while we may be enjoying the fruits of system rationalization, we are being deprived of the enrichment of life that would come from a life-world that was allowed to flourish. Many of the social movements that have arisen at the "borders" between life-world and system in the last few decades are traceable to a resistance against the colonization and impoverishment of the life-world.

In analyzing the way in which the system colonizes the life-world, Habermas sees himself in alignment with much of the history of social thought:

> The main strand of social theory—from Marx via Spencer and Durkheim to Simmel, Weber and Lukács—has to be understood as the answer to the entry of system-environment boundaries into society itself [Habermas's life-world], to the genesis of the "internal foreign country" . . . which has been understood as the hallmark of modernity.
>
> (Habermas, 1991:255–256; italics added)

In other words, the "hallmark of modernity" to Habermas, as well as to most of classical theory, has been, in Habermas's terms, the colonization of the life-world by the system.

What, then, for Habermas would constitute the completion of modernity's project? It seems clear that the final product would be a fully rational society in which both system and life-world rationality were allowed to express themselves fully without one destroying the other. We currently suffer from an impoverished life-world, and that problem must be overcome. However, the answer does not lie in the destruction of systems (especially the economic and administrative systems), because it is they that provide the material prerequisites needed to allow the life-world to rationalize.

One of the issues Habermas (1987b) deals with is the increasing problems confronted by the modern, bureaucratic, social welfare state. Many of those associated with such a state recognize the problems, but their solution is to deal with them at the system level by, for example, simply adding a new subsystem to deal with the problems. However, Habermas does not think the problems can be solved in this way. Rather, they must be solved in the relationship between system and life-world. First, "restraining barriers" must be put in place to reduce the impact of system on life-world. Second, "sensors" must be built in order to enhance the impact of life-world on system. Habermas concludes that contemporary problems cannot be solved "by systems learning to function better. Rather, impulses from the lifeworld must be able to enter into the self-steering of functional systems" (1987b:364). These would constitute important steps toward the creation of mutually enriching life-world and system. It is here that social movements enter the picture, because they represent the hope of a recoupling of system and life-world so that the two can rationalize to the highest possible degree.

Habermas sees little hope in the United States, which seems intent on buttressing system rationality at the cost of a continuing impoverishment of the life-world. However, Habermas does see hope in Europe, which has the possibility of putting "an end to the confused idea that the normative content of modernity that is stored in rationalized life worlds could be set free only by means of ever more complex systems" (1987b:366). Thus, Europe has the possibility of assimilating "in a decisive way the legacy of Occidental rationalism" (Habermas, 1987b:366). That legacy translates today into restraints on system rationality in order to allow life-world rationality to flourish to the extent that the two types of rationalities can coexist as equals within the modern world. Such a full partnership between system and life-world rationality would constitute the completion of modernity's project. Because we remain a long way from that goal, we are far from the end of modernity, let alone on the verge, or in the midst, of postmodernity.

# JURGEN HABERMAS

## *A Biographical Sketch*

Jurgen Habermas is arguably the most important social thinker in the world today. He was born in Düsseldorf, Germany, on June 18, 1929, and his family was middle class and rather traditional. Habermas's father was director of the Chamber of Commerce. In his early teens, during World War II, Habermas was profoundly affected by the war. The end of the war brought new hope and opportunities for many Germans, including Habermas. The fall of Nazism brought optimism about the future of Germany, but Habermas was disappointed in the lack of dramatic progress in the years immediately after the war. With the end of Nazism, all sorts of intellectual opportunities arose, and once-banned books became available to the young Habermas. They included Western and German literature, as well as tracts written by Marx and Engels. Between 1949 and 1954 Habermas studied a wide range of topics (for example, philosophy, psychology, German literature) in Göttingen, Zurich, and Bonn. However, none of the teachers at the schools at which Habermas studied were illustrious, and most were compromised by the fact that they either had supported the Nazis overtly or simply had continued to carry out their academic responsibilities under the Nazi regime. Habermas received his doctorate from the University of Bonn in 1954 and worked for two years as a journalist.

In 1956 Habermas arrived at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and became associated with the Frankfurt school. Indeed, he became research assistant to one of the most illustrious members of that school, Theodor Adorno, as well as an associate of the Institute (Wiggershaus, 1994). Although the Frankfurt school often is thought of as highly coherent, that was not Habermas's view:

> For me there was never a consistent theory. Adorno wrote essays on the critique of culture and also gave seminars on Hegel. He presented a certain Marxist background—and that was it.
>
> (Habermas, cited in Wiggershaus, 1994:2)

While he was associated with the Institute for Social Research, Habermas demonstrated from the beginning an independent intellectual orientation. A 1957 article by Habermas got him into trouble with the leader of the Institute, Max Horkheimer. Habermas urged critical thought and practical action, but Horkheimer was afraid that such a position would jeopardize the publicly funded Institute. Horkheimer strongly recommended that Habermas be dismissed from the Institute. Horkheimer said of Habermas, "'He probably has a good, or even brilliant, career

as a writer in front of him, but he would only cause the Institute immense damage'" (cited in Wiggershaus, 1994:555). The article eventually was published, but not under the auspices of the Institute and with virtually no reference to it. Eventually, Horkheimer enforced impossible conditions on Habermas's work and Habermas resigned.

In 1961 Habermas became a privatdocent and completed his "Habilitation" (a second dissertation required by German universities) at the University of Marburg. Having already published a number of notable works, Habermas was recommended for a professorship of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg even before he had completed his Habilitation. He remained at Heidelberg until 1964, when he moved on to the University of Frankfurt as a professor of philosophy and sociology. From 1971 to 1981 he was the director of the Max Planck Institute. He returned to the University of Frankfurt as a professor of philosophy, and in 1994 he became an emeritus professor at that institution. He has won a number of prestigious academic prizes and has been awarded honorary professorships at a number of universities.

For many years, Habermas was the world's leading neo-Marxist (Nollman, 2005b). However, over the years his work has broadened to involve many different theoretical inputs. Habermas continues to hold out hope for the future of the modern world. It is in this sense that Habermas writes of modernity's unfinished project. While Marx focused on work, Habermas is concerned mainly with communication, which he considers to be a more general process than is work. While Marx focused on the distorting effect of the structure of capitalist society on work, Habermas is concerned with the way the structure of modern society distorts communication. While Marx sought a future world involving full and creative labor, Habermas seeks a future society characterized by free and open communication. Thus, there are startling similarities between the theories of Marx and Habermas. Most generally, both are modernists who believed or believe that in their time modernity's project (creative and fulfilling work for Marx, open communication for Habermas) has not yet been completed. Yet both have had faith that in the future that project will be completed.

It is this commitment to modernism, along with his faith in the future, that sets Habermas apart from many leading contemporary thinkers, such as Jean Baudrillard and other postmodernists. While the latter are often driven to nihilism, Habermas continues to believe in his lifelong (and modernity's) project. Similarly, while other postmodernists (for example, Lyotard) reject the possibility of creating grand narratives, Habermas continues to work on and support what is perhaps the most notable grand theory in modern social theory. Much is at stake for Habermas in his battle with the postmodernists. If they win out, Habermas may come to be seen as the last great modernist thinker. If Habermas (and his supporters) emerge victorious, he may be viewed as the savior of the modernist project and of grand theory in the social sciences.

# Habermas versus Postmodernists

Habermas makes a case not only for modernity but also against the postmodernists. Habermas offered some early criticisms in an essay, "Modernity versus Postmodernity" (1981), which has achieved wide recognition.[1] In that essay, Habermas raises the issue of whether, in light of the failures of the twentieth century, we "should try to hold on to the *intentions of the Enlightenment,* feeble as they may be, or should we declare the entire project of modernity a lost cause?" (1981:9). Habermas, of course, is not in favor of giving up on the Enlightenment project or, in other words, on modernity. Rather, he chooses to focus on the "mistakes" of those who do reject modernity. One of the latter's most important mistakes is their willingness to give up on science, especially a science of the life-world. The separation of science from the life-world, and the leaving of it to experts, would, if done in conjunction with the creation of other autonomous spheres, involve the surrender of "the project of modernity altogether" (Habermas, 1981:14). Habermas refuses to give up on the possibility of a rational, "scientific" understanding of the life-world as well as the possibility of the rationalization of that world.

Holub (1991) has offered an overview of Habermas's most important criticisms of the postmodernists. First, the postmodernists are equivocal about whether they are producing serious theory or literature. If we treat them as producing serious theory, their work becomes incomprehensible because of "their refusal to engage in the institutionally established vocabularies" (Holub, 1991:158). If we treat the work of the postmodernists as literature, "then their arguments forfeit all logical force" (Holub, 1991:158). In either case, it becomes almost impossible to critically analyze the work of the postmodernists seriously, because they can always claim that we do not understand their words or their literary endeavors.

Second, Habermas feels that the postmodernists are animated by normative sentiments but that what those sentiments are is concealed from the reader. Thus, the reader is unable to understand what postmodernists are really up to, why they are critiquing society, from their stated objectives. Furthermore, while they have hidden normative sentiments, the postmodernists overtly repudiate such sentiments. The lack of such overt sentiments prevents postmodernists from developing a self-conscious praxis aimed at overcoming the problems they find in the world. In contrast, the fact that Habermas's normative sentiments (free and open communication) are overt and clearly stated makes the source of his critiques of society clear, and it provides the base for political praxis.

Third, Habermas accuses postmodernism of being a totalizing perspective that fails "to differentiate phenomena and practices that occur within modern society" (Holub, 1991:159). For example, the view of the world as dominated by power and surveillance is not fine-grained enough to allow for meaningful analysis of the real sources of oppression in the modern world.

Finally, the postmodernists are accused of ignoring that which Habermas finds absolutely central—everyday life and its practices. This oversight constitutes a double

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[1] There is a sense that in his later work Habermas has offered a softer and more fine-grained critique of the postmodernists (Peters, 1994).

loss for postmodernists. On the one hand, they are closed off from an important source for the development of normative standards. After all, the rational potential that exists in everyday life is an important source of Habermas's ideas on communicative rationality (Cooke, 1994). On the other hand, the everyday world also constitutes the ultimate goal for work in the social sciences because it is there that theoretical ideas can have an impact on praxis.

Habermas (1994:107) offers a good summary of his views on modernity-postmodernity and a useful transition to Chapter 17 of this text, in which we deal with postmodern social theory: "The concept of modernity no longer comes with a promise of happiness. But despite all the talk of postmodernity, there are no visible rational alternatives to this form of life. What else is left for us, then, but at least to search out practical improvements *within* this form of life?"

# Informationalism and the Network Society

One recent contribution to modern social theory is a trilogy authored by Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, 1998; Allan, 2007) with the overarching title *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture.* Castells (1996:4) articulates a position opposed to postmodern social theory, which he sees as indulging in "celebrating the end of history, and, to some extent, the end of Reason, giving up on our capacity to understand and make sense":

> The project informing this book swims against streams of destruction, and takes exception to various forms of intellectual nihilism, social skepticism, and political cynicism. I believe in rationality, and the possibility of calling upon reason . . . I believe in the chances of meaningful social action. . . . And, yes, I believe in spite of a long tradition of sometimes tragic intellectual errors, that observing, analyzing, and theorizing is a way of helping to build a different, better world.
>
> (Castells, 1996:4)

Castells examines the emergence of a new society, culture, and economy in light of the revolution, begun in the United States in the 1970s, in informational technology (television, computers, and so on). This revolution led, in turn, to a fundamental restructuring of the capitalist system beginning in the 1980s and to the emergence of what Castells calls "informational capitalism." Also emerging were "informational societies" (although there are important cultural and institutional differences among these societies). Both are based on "informationalism" ("a mode of development in which the main source of productivity is the qualitative capacity to optimize the combination and use of factors of production on the basis of knowledge and information" [Castells, 1998:7]). The spread of informationalism, especially informational capitalism, leads to the emergence of oppositional social movements based on self and identity ("the process by which a social actor recognizes itself and constructs meaning primarily on the basis of a given cultural attribute or set of attributes, to the exclusion of a broader reference to other social structures" [Castells, 1996:22]). Such movements bring about the contemporary equivalent of what Marxists call "class struggle." The hope against the spread of informational capitalism and the problems it causes (exploitation, exclusion, threats

to self and identity) is not the working class but a diverse set of social movements (e.g., ecological, feminist) based primarily on identity.

At the heart of Castells's analysis is what he calls the information technology paradigm with five basic characteristics. First, these are technologies that act on information. Second, since information is part of all human activity, these technologies have a pervasive effect. Third, all systems using information technologies are defined by a "networking logic" that allows them to affect a wide variety of processes and organizations. Fourth, the new technologies are highly flexible, allowing them to adapt and change constantly. Finally, the specific technologies associated with information are merging into a highly integrated system.

In the 1980s there emerged a new, increasingly profitable global informational economy. "It is *informational* because the productivity and competitiveness of units or agents in this economy (be it firms, regions, or nations) fundamentally depend upon their capacity to generate, process, and apply efficiently knowledge-based information" (Castells, 1996:66). It is global because it has the "*capacity to work as a unit in real time on a planetary scale*" (Castells, 1996:92). This was made possible, for the first time, by the new information and communication technologies. And it is "informational, not just information-based, because the cultural-institutional attributes of the whole social system must be included in the diffusion and implementation of the new technological paradigm" (Castells, 1996:91). Although it is global, there are differences, and Castells distinguishes among regions that lie at the heart of the new global economy (North America, the European Union, and the Asian Pacific). Thus, we are talking about a regionalized, global economy. In addition, there is considerable diversity within each region, and of crucial importance is the fact that while some areas of the globe are included, others are excluded and suffer grave negative consequences. Whole areas of the world (e.g., sub-Saharan Africa) are excluded, as are parts of the privileged regions, such as the inner cities in the United States.

Accompanying the rise of the new global informational economy is the emergence of a new organizational form, the network enterprise. Among other things, the network enterprise is characterized by flexible (rather than mass) production, new management systems (frequently adapted from Japanese models), organizations based on a horizontal rather than a vertical model, and the intertwining of large corporations in strategic alliances. However, most important, the fundamental component of organizations is a series of networks. It is this that leads Castells (1996:171) to argue that "a new organizational form has emerged as characteristic of the informational/global economy: the *network enterprise*" defined as *"that specific form of enterprise whose system of means is constituted by the intersection of segments of autonomous systems of goals."* The network enterprise is the materialization of the culture of the global informational economy, and it makes possible the transformation of signals into commodities through the processing of knowledge. As a result, the nature of work is being transformed (e.g., the individualization of work through such things as flex-time), although the precise nature of this transformation varies from one nation to another.

Castells (1996:373) also discusses the emergence (accompanying the development of multimedia out of the fusion of the mass media and computers) of the culture of *real virtuality,* "*a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic*

*existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make-believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience.*" In contrast to the past dominated by "the space of places" (e.g., cities like New York or London), a new spatial logic, the "space of flows," has emerged. We have become a world dominated by processes rather than physical locations (although the latter obviously continue to exist). Similarly, we have entered an era of "timeless time" in which, for example, information is instantly available anywhere on the globe.

Going beyond the network enterprise, Castells (1996:469, 470; italics added) argues that the "dominant functions and processes in the information age are increasingly organized around *networks*" defined as sets of "interconnected nodes." Networks are open, capable of unlimited expansion, dynamic, and able to innovate without disrupting the system. However, the fact that our age is defined by networks (the "network society") does not mean the end of capitalism. In fact, at least at the moment, networks allow capitalism to become, for the first time, truly global and organized on the basis of global financial flows, exemplified by the much-discussed global "financial casino" that is a wonderful example of not only a network but also an informational system. Money won and lost here is now far more important than that earned through the production process. Money has come to be separated from production; we are in a capitalist age defined by the endless search for money.

However, as we saw above, Castells does not see the development of networks, the culture of real virtuality, informationalism, and especially their use in informational capitalism as going unchallenged. These are opposed by individuals and collectivities with identities of their own that they seek to defend. Thus, "God, nation, family, and community will provide unbreakable, eternal codes around which a counter-offensive will be mounted" (Castells, 1997:66). However, it is important to recognize that these counter-movements must rely on information and networks in order to succeed. Thus, they are deeply implicated in the new order. In this context, Castells describes a wide range of social movements including the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, the American militia, the Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo, environmentalism, feminism, and the gay movement.

What of the state? In Castells's view, it is increasingly powerless in this new world of the globalization of the economy and its dependence on global capital markets. Thus, for example, states have become unable to protect their welfare programs because imbalances around the globe will lead capital to gravitate toward those states with low welfare costs. Also eroding the power of the state are global communications that flow freely in and out of any country. Then there is the globalization of crime and the creation of global networks that are beyond the control of any single state. Also weakening the state is the growth of multilateralism, the emergence of super nation-states such as the European Union, and internal divisions. While they will continue to exist, Castells (1997:304) sees states becoming *"nodes of a broader network of power."* The dilemma facing the state is that if it represents its national constituencies, it will be less effective in the global system, but if it focuses on the latter, it will fail to represent its constituencies adequately.

An example of the failure of the state is the Soviet Union. It simply was incapable of adapting to the new informationalism and world of networks. For example,

the Soviet state monopolized information, but this was incompatible with a world in which success is associated with the free flow of information. As it fell apart, the old Soviet Union proved easy prey for global criminal elements. Ironically, although in its early years Russia was excluded from the global information society, it was (and is) deeply implicated in global criminality.

Given his critical orientation, especially to informational capitalism and its threats to self, identity, welfare, as well as its exclusion of vast portions of the world, Castells (1998:359) concludes that as they are currently constituted, our "economy, society and culture . . . limit collective creativity, confiscate the harvest of information technology, and deviate our energy into self-destructive confrontation." However, it need not be this way because there "is nothing that cannot be changed by conscious, purposive social action" (Castells, 1998:360).

Castells offers the first sustained sociological analysis of our new computerized world, and there are many insights to be derived from his work. Two major weaknesses stand out. First, this is primarily an empirical study (relying on secondary data), and Castells takes pains to avoid using a series of theoretical resources that might have enhanced his work. Second, he remains locked in a productivist perspective and fails to deal with the implications of his analysis for consumption. Nonetheless, Castells has clearly offered us an important beginning in our effort to gain a better understanding of the emerging world he describes.

The discussion of Castells's work represents a perfect transition to the next chapter, on globalization theory, because, as we have seen, much of his theory relates to global issues and is often discussed as a theory of globalization. Much of globalization theory can be seen as modern (we will encounter other ideas of some of the modern theorists encountered in this chapter—Giddens, Beck, Bauman—in the next chapter), and it has its roots in modern perspectives such as modernization theory and dependency theory. However, globalization theory also critiques and reacts against these earlier perspectives as well as, in at least some cases, the basic tenets of many theories of modernity. Although many of the ideas to be encountered in Chapter 16 are quite modern, many others go beyond the modern to implicit (e.g., "glocalization," "hybridization," and "creolization") and explicit ("empire" and "multitude") association with the postmodern ideas that are dealt with in Chapter 17.

## Summary

In this chapter we survey a number of theoretical perspectives that continue to see the contemporary world in modern terms. Anthony Giddens sees modernity as a juggernaut that offers a number of advantages but also poses a series of dangers. Among the dangers underscored by Giddens are the risks associated with the modern juggernaut. These dangers are the key issue in Beck's work on the risk society. The modern world is seen as being characterized by risk and the need on the part of people to prevent risk and protect themselves from it. Bauman sees the Holocaust as the paradigm of rationality and modernity. An emphasis on the Holocaust indicates the irrationalities, and more generally the dangers, associated with modernity and

increasing rationalization. Late Modernity, to Bounan, is defined by its liquidity in comparison to the solidity of earlier epochs. Next, we discuss Habermas's work on modernity as an unfinished project. Habermas, too, focuses on rationality, but his concern is with the dominance of system rationality and the impoverishment of the rationality of the life-world. Habermas sees the completion of modernity in the mutually enriching rationalization of system and life-world.

The next section is devoted to a discussion of the recent work of Manuel Castells. Castells is concerned with the growth of informationalism and the development of the network society. It is mainly the computer and the information flows it permits that have transformed the world and in the process created a series of problems such as the exclusion of great parts of the world, and even some pockets in the United States, from this system and its rewards.