

A Miscellaneous Perspective on the Issue of Modernity

Oana Tătaru

Lecturer Ph.D., Faculty of History and Political Sciences, "Ovidius" University of Constanta, Romania
tataru_oana@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: The assessment of a concept had constantly been a challenging phase in respect of the precise moment of appearance, all the more as the postulation – *modernity*- was considered controversial and complex along its entire history. An aspect that had to be mentioned was the fact according to which the idea of modernity could not be conceived but within the parameters of a particular awareness of the time, namely the historic, linear and irreversible one. Modernity would be purposeless if a society had not regarded the temporal-sequential concept of history as representative and organized temporal categories in accordance with a mythical and recurrent pattern. Although the notion of modernity was assimilated almost automatically to secularism, the main corresponding constitutive element had been the sense of unrepeatable time, not compatible with a religious *Weltanschauung*. The premodern societies highly considered the religious doctrines in contrast to actual realities the public opinion of which did not appear as the prerogative of an educated minority, but a constantly enhanced forum of social communication.

KEYWORDS: modernity, civilization, chronicle, society, individual, culture

The history of mankind collates in effect a series of two successive, melded but not similar chronicles. In point of the former, it might be assessed the fact according to which people lived closely grouped in tight communities. Even the greatest empires, colossal conglomerates, have functioned under prevailing local living structures. The time flowed slowly/imperceptibly, whereas the perception was of a never-changing world, at least as regards its essential data. There were no disruptions within the framework of the innate community to significantly alter the proper course. Thereafter, the evolution was towards an inclusive world, whilst the pace accelerated. The entire process throttled by the middle of the XVIIIth century, *the modernity*, and continued up to present time, generation after generation. The traditional structures initially fissured, and then fell apart, the moment for mankind to reach the age of inventions. As opposed to the conservative world with its corresponding values transmitted from generation to generation, the modern one was incessantly being created. Nothing could withstand the attrition of time. Decade after decade, history had systematically altered the plain bonds of solidarity, thus determining the individuals unto an ever-growing and less coherent world. The progress may have been considered not being an alert one, but with modernity, evolution has marked a significant expedited path. Hence, humans have acquired more civil liberties but at the same time confusion is part of the process as the number of potential alternatives has been modified. Phoniness, a characteristic of the novel world tends to monopolize each aspect of the society whereas the individuals have relentlessly constructed the ideal world at the risk to give rise to the worst one. An analysis as regards the socio-religious aspect of this new world might be difficult to be realized as it either induces transient vanities or captures completely the individual. Still, there are particular ideas or concepts that the hectic life might slight but the consciousness of the individual has the role to valorize, namely *the intrinsic universality* of human values, *the significance* with respect to the origins of historical patterns/models and *the subtle triumph of the truth* beyond the alienation, a characteristic inherent to secularization (Baconsky 1999, 170).

In the last one hundred fifteen years terms as “modern”, “modernity”, “modernism” along with a series of related notions have been in relation with the historical relativism, that might be referred to as an individual form to criticize the tradition. At the end of the XVIIth

century and the beginning of the XVIIIth, the majority of the “moderns” involved in the far-famed *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (The dispute between antics and the moderns) or, the English correspondent, *The Battle of the Books* have continued to consider the aesthetic as an ageless and transcendental pattern. The abolition in point of the traditional aesthetic dominance, the time frame, the change and self-awareness of the present are to become valuable sources as regards what Lionel Trilling once identified by means of an inspired syntagm “the antagonistic culture” of the modernism (Calinescu 2005, 15).

The modernity constitutes the onset for the *avant-garde*, but concurrently tuns against itself, thus being perceived as *decadence* and dramatizes the intense sense of own corresponding crisis. Albeit contradictory, the concepts of *avant-garde* and *decadence* appear to assume the form of synonyms and, in certain instants, to be even used interchangeably.

In the broadest sense, modernity is reflected by means of the irreconcilable opposition between the series of corresponding values (1) the objective time, socially measurable, of the capitalist civilization and (2) the personal existence that is subjective, imaginary being reflected in the evolution of the inner self. The latter identity with regard to the relation of time-self constitutes the essence of the modernist culture. This perspective determines the aesthetic modernity to reveal or unveil part of the motives of the profound crisis.

After the Second World War and especially starting with the 50s numerous thinkers have predicted the concept of *the postmodern epoch*, namely Arnold Toynbee, the philosopher of the culture and history that has expressed the *postmodern* term, a series of art and literary critics like Harry Levin, Irving Howe, Leslie Fielder, George Steiner (assessed the idea according to which the period might be labelled as *post-culture*). The debate has involved sociologists, as well, being determined by sociological theories and “mass society” (a phrase that has been defined by David Riesman in his best-known book *The recluse mob*, published in 1960), “the consumer society”, “mass culture” or “popular”, “postindustrial society” notions. A particular focus is required in point of the definition of both *theory* and *mass*.

The notion of mass is, by definition, vague or imprecise as Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron have asserted. The phrase *mass society* or *mass culture* denotes the fact according to which each individual that belongs to the above-mentioned concepts assumes the corresponding characteristics.

The term “theory” belongs to the Greek root *theoria* that involves the sense of vision, thus one of the functions of the theory is to determine the individual to observe and to interpret phenomena and events. Therefore, theories are the means to notice what precisely holds out understanding and manners of explaining, that concentrates the attention upon specific trends, connections, or the social system as a whole. Moreover, the theories account for the social realities and helps the individual to comprehend the surrounding world, ensuring the overall view necessary for the contextualization of personal experience within the framework of relations and social institutions.

One aspect is to be emphasized, videlicet one of the most simple and nuanced discussion in respect of the culture of modernism/postmodernism has been initiated by a sociologist, David Bell, in his work *Cultural contradictions of capitalism*, thus considering that the modern society might appear omens of a possible revolution:

“We are facing a radical disjunction between culture and social structure that along the course of history have served as a basis for more direct social revolutions. The new revolution has already begun in two fundamental manners. First, the autonomy of culture starts to be perceived as being present in various aspects of life. What has been once fantasia and imagination, in present the postmodern attitude transforms it into reality. (...) For another thing, the way of being that was assimilated with the *cenacle*, has now been adopted by “the masses” ... and dominate the cultural scene” (Calinescu 2005, 17).

The phenomenon of irrepressible consumerism, the fear of boredom and the need to escape have contributed to the development of *kitsch*. The kitsch is one of the most typical

products of modernity. At this juncture there is relevant to mention the studies of The Frankfurt School members that have examined the interconnections between culture and communication in point of the artefacts representing the image of the society from that time. As an outcome, the study of culture and communication has been integrated within the framework of the critical social theory and a significant part of theory of modern society. The term culture represents “a complex aggregate that is constituted of norms, customs, repertoires of action and representation and acquired by the human being as a member of society” (Warnier 1999, 13).

Modernity and kitsch seem to exclude one another at least to the degree that modernity implies the anti-traditional actuality, the experiment, the “make it new” novelty of Pound, the acceptance of change whereas the kitsch -with all the diversity that it is encompassed by the concept- suggests repetition, triviality, being defined in a gratifying manner as an aesthetic form of the mind. Though there is the likelihood for the concept to be encountered in a variety of contexts the word lacks almost completely what one might identify as “historical profoundness”, meaning that it cannot be applied to anything concrete prior to the end of the XVIIIth century and the beginning of the XIXth century (Calinescu 2005, 266).

In other terms, the kitsch as regards the etymological and conceptual acceptance is in essence modern, the cultural stance of the present consumer society, one of the direct representations of the triumphant aesthetics and consumerist period. The individual is the one that in the end to draw the final lines so as to create the general image and to evaluate the possibilities of choice. The surrounding world displays a multitude of facets as regard reality, oftentimes deceiving or conclusive enough to distract the attention or adequate perception on the accurate variant, hence an adequate channel or source of communication in conjunction with the awareness over the concrete are to be considered as essential.

The relation between culture and communication might be successfully analyzed if one takes into account commune features, meaning that both function/exist by means of individual experiences that are subject to constant changes of component elements. In this respect, an idea has to be emphasized, that is a cultural analysis will highlight “both the manner in which the dominant ideology is structured in point of the text and the receptor subject along with the specific features that allow a brokered lecture. The cultural assessment carries the conclusion in respect of the ethnographic studies of the historical and social semnifications are in direct relation with the semiotic analysis of the text” (Kellner 2001, 50).

Nevertheless, between culture and communication cannot be established either elements of complete identity or definite priority rapports in point of the history of mankind or the formation of individual consciousness. The sociologist John Thompson considers that the aforesaid social thinkers have not took into consideration the idea according to which the development of the means of communication might represent an important issue, Furthermore, they have believed the fundamental cultural dynamics associated with the evolution of modern societies to have as basis the rationalisation and secularisation processes. Therefore, the use of the means of communication would imply the development of new forms of interaction as regards the social world, different types of relations along with other modalities of connection in point of the others and the self. The function of the communication channels cannot be limited to the transmission the information and the symbolic message towards the individuals whose relation in respect of others remain unchanged. In the situation that requires the participation of various individuals and the use of means of communication then forms of interaction are present but they differ in terms of the types of relational circumstances.

„Consequently, in a significant manner, the usage of the means of communication transforms the temporal and spatial organization of social life and creates new forms of action and interaction as well as innovative manners to exercise the power not being related with the existence of a common space” (Stanciugelu 2009, 139).

A part of the interactions that develop in the course of everyday life may implicate a combination with respect to various forms of interaction- in other terms, thus possessing a hybrid character. The individuals are subject to acquire the information and the symbolic message from different sources other than the regular ones. The establishment along with the renewal of traditions are processes that become more and more related to the mediated symbolic exchange. The manner of the communication ought to be clear as it is provided by the fact that a word fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do what that specific word has to do. It has to be appropriate, avoiding both meanness and undue elevation (*Aristotle - The Art of Rhetoric* 2012, 160).

An essential component of communication is represented by language, one of the characteristics of the "human culture", meaning the part that the individual "adds to the culture" and not what one might inherit from ancestors. The language does not function only as a component of culture but also as a vehicle of all cultural practices, namely the word mimics the world to the same extent in which it signifies the surrounding milieu. In the work *Les mots et les choses*, Michel Foucault had demonstrated that the individual and the language were not able to coexist unless both articulated one another.

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The term and the concept of modernity have a considerable consistent and intricate history with specific phases of its corresponding evolution. The necessity for a word to render the meaning modern must have been made in the period of Cicero (Rotaru 2005, 201-202) that has borrowed the Greek term *neoteros*, later becoming *neotericus* in Latin. In the XXth century the presence of modern, modernity, modernism has recorded a significant rate of usage, the last of the terms referring to the awareness in respect of the modernity as a historical period in development with an acknowledged normative character. The core essence of the modern world might be identified as being torn between reason/judgement (organization) and temporality (the mundane character), system/ structure and history.

The historians in respect of the idea of progress have established that the well-known apothegm as regards the midget that was positioned on the back of a giant capable to see far beyond belongs to Bernard of Chartres, who died in 1126. The apothegm of Bernard is mentioned for the first time in *The Metalogicon* of John of Salisbury in 1159, has been, with good reason, considered one of the essential documents of what the literary historians identify as the Renaissance of the XIIth century. The signification is related to the fact

according to which oftentimes people know more due not to the intelligence but owing to the cleverness of the mind of some other individuals and, as an outcome, people hold precious treasures that have been inherited from the ancestors. Bernard of Chartres has compared humans with insignificant/valueless little people that are perched on the back of the extremely tall persons, being able to understand or to see at a considerable distance due not to a wider sight but because of the wisdom of wise men.

The analogy of Bertrand is quite vivid, simple to be perceived and conclusive for the mindset whilst the apparent subtle ambiguity succeeds to gather several fundamental assertions of the moderns. The semantic flexibility of the medieval analogy envisages a different perspective, namely that the people of a new epoch might be evaluated as being educated, but concurrently, less meritorious in comparison with their predecessors—they know more on account of the cumulative effect of learning.

The contrasting figures of the of the philosophers and little individuals have disappeared but the central idea of successive generations has been preserved and articulated.

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