Living in modernity

This is /modern/, you ask? Well yes. Two women alone, without men nearby to shepherd them, wearing manufactured fashions, holding manufactured umbrellas, metal roofs and manufactured chairs in the background. Maybe not the best picture of modernity ever, but it’s not that bad.
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INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY

Aims of the chapter

This chapter introduces the concept of modernity in order to explore the distinctiveness of life in modern (as opposed to traditional or pre-modern) societies. It highlights the ways in which historical structural changes, often of global proportion, have altered our everyday experiences and continue to do so. In particular, it considers the impact of four key processes of modernity: the development of industrial capitalism; the growth of rational forms of thought and organisation; the rise of the nation-state; and the separation of social life into public and private realms. It then briefly touches on whether society has now changed to such an extent that we can be said to be living in a postmodern era.

By the end of this chapter, you should have an understanding of the following important terms:

- Modernity
- Consumption
- Industrialisation
- Bureaucracy
- Urbanisation
- Nation-state
- Fordism
- Postmodernity

Introduction

Sociology emerged and flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – the era of modernity. As a modernist project, it was committed to the idea that it was possible to produce reliable knowledge about society that human beings could use to shape their futures for the better. In everyday language, ‘modern’ often means up-to-date or contemporary. Sociologists use it in a different sense – for them, modern societies have a long history! Modern societies and sociology emerged from a period that is sometimes referred to as the Great Transformation (Polanyi, 1973), a term that reflects the magnitude of the changes that took place during this time. The Great Transformation involved complex social, economic, political and cultural processes that together contributed to the development of strikingly new forms of social life. It is these changes that are the subject of this chapter.

Very long-term processes that become most apparent in the 19th century. What we can say is that, although they were to exert a world-wide influence, they initially centred on Western Europe. Also, while their origin can be traced back hundreds of years, it was only in the nineteenth century that recognisably modern societies appeared.

The origins of modernity

The birth of modernity involved a number of interrelated processes, contemporary aspects of which are examined in more detail in the succeeding chapters of this book. Here we shall identify some of the main features.
Rapid, continuous growth of productive capacities was made possible by new kinds of economic activity and new ways of working. Crucial factors in the emergence of modern societies were the application of more efficient forms of food production, and then the replacement of agriculture by industrial manufacture as the dominant form of productive activity. Manufacturing had been taking place for many hundreds of years – what was new was the scale of the undertaking and how it took place. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Industrial Revolution was primarily about new ways of organising and controlling production: the factory system, for example, established greater control over workers and allowed the segmentation of tasks into sophisticated divisions of labour.

A precursor of industrialisation was the development of a new, dynamic form of economic activity – capitalism – which was initially applied to agriculture and trade but in the nineteenth century became the driving force behind the growth of manufacturing. Capitalism involved new attitudes and institutions: entrepreneurs engaged in the sustained, systematic pursuit of profit; the market acted as the mechanism of productive life; and goods, services and labour became commodities whose use was determined by rational calculation.

There were significant changes in population growth and movement. As birth rates rose and death rates fell, the estimated number of people in Europe grew rapidly from 120 million in 1750 to 468 million in 1913 (Kumar, 1978). This period witnessed mass movements from the countryside to the city in a process of urbanisation. Also significant was the extent of forced and voluntary migration around the world: a striking example of this was the way in which North and South America were rapidly populated by European migrants and African slaves.

Modernity saw the development of new forms of government. The nation-state, claiming absolute control over a bounded territory, became the key unit of power. Modernity involved the establishment of highly developed political apparatuses: bureaucratic organisation allowed the state to play a greater role in the lives of ordinary people. This was accompanied by the development of new political ideas such as nationalism, citizenship, democracy, liberalism, socialism and conservatism. The development of new philosophies of government was part of a wider change in the intellectual and cultural landscape. In the eighteenth century, The Enlightenment brought new ways of understanding the natural and social worlds. It heralded an era of great medical, scientific and technological innovation. Religious institutions and doctrines declined in influence – a process called secularisation – and for the emerging secular intelligentsia, science, truth and progress were the new faith.

Finally, Western expansion around the world was a crucial factor in the formation of modern societies. As early as the fifteenth century, Europeans began to travel the globe. In the years that followed, contacts between the West and the rest (Hall, 1992a) meant trade, plunder and eventually colonisation. This expansion provided the wealth, raw materials and then markets that drove European economic development. In other regions, it led to the destruction of societies and cultures in the face of Western power.

It is no coincidence that sociology emerged as an academic discipline during the nineteenth century. It was a response to a prolonged period of unprecedented social change when the old order, the old ways of life and old certainties were disappearing. The social changes investigated by the early sociologists were so rapid and far-reaching that they were convinced they were witnessing the birth of a different kind of society.
Social theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw their task as making sense of the Great Transformation and understanding the new societies that were being created.

It is perhaps not surprising that early theorists assumed that the dynamics of modernity would shape and structure all societies in a similar – positive – way. Societies were understood in terms of national boundaries or particular forms of society (for example, capitalism), and individual societies were seen as more or less conforming to the form and content of a modern society. Modernity provided a sort of template for social development.

Now the dynamics of modernity are no longer seen in terms of a template or model of a single modern society that all nation-states are destined to become. It is true that a significant number of societies in the world are industrialised, urbanised nation-states, yet, as we shall see in Chapter 3, their industries, cities and governments are shaped by global processes that cut across states and societies. The result is that ‘It is increasingly difficult to understand local and national destinies without reference to global forces’ (McGrew, 1992, p. 63), but at the same time a growing division and divergence means that modernity does not have the same pay-off all over the world. This is an issue to which we shall return later, particularly in the next chapter. First, however, let us look in more depth at the experience, character and meaning of modernity.

**CONNECTIONS**

The question of whether we live in a late modern or a postmodern society has engaged sociologists for a number of years. Although no agreement has been reached on the matter, an account of the dimensions of postmodernity are provided in Chapter 19, pages 514–20.

**The process of becoming modern: transformations of time and space**

Major changes in the sense and use of time and space were central to the formation of modernity (Berman, 1983; Harvey, 1990; Giddens, 1990a). From the late fifteenth century onwards, European exploration led to the forging of new trading links between Eastern and Western civilisations and subsequently to European colonial expansion. In one of the largest population movements in history, an estimated 24 million Africans were enslaved, some eleven million of whom survived the terrible journey across the Atlantic to the Americas, where they were exploiting on rural plantations in the production of American tobacco, Caribbean sugar and other products that became part...
of the staple diet of white populations in Europe and North America. The slave trade, eventually abolished in the British Empire in 1833 and in the US in 1865, provides a graphic example of how people were caught up in the development of modernity in profoundly unequal ways, as well as illustrating one aspect of the long and sometimes troubled history of what Robertson (1992) calls ‘the compression of the world’.

Scientific and technological advances, from the discovery that the earth was round to the invention of the mechanical clock and the harnessing of steam power (greatly reducing the time taken to cross sea and land), obviously contributed significantly towards a changed understanding of space and time – a change that Giddens and others highlight in order to demonstrate the uniqueness of the institutions that emerged during the great transformation to modernity. Giddens (1990a, pp.19–20), for example, argues that the modest railway timetable can be seen as epitomising the modern era, terming it ‘a time-space ordering device’ that ‘permits the complex co-ordination of trains and their passengers over time and space’.

We shall now consider four key aspects of change in the rise of modernity:

- Industrialisation.
- Increasing rationalisation.
- The rise of the nation-state.
- The differentiation of public and private spheres.

Living with industrial capitalism

The origins of the Industrial Revolution can be traced back to about 1780 in England. Its impact on both the social and natural world was profound. The development of steam power and the spectacular transformation of the coal, iron and textile industries in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries irreversibly changed the landscape, the economy and relations between the social classes. The following (quoted in Jennings, 1985 p. 165) describes England’s Black Country in the 1830s:

“The earth seems to have been turned inside out... The coal... is blazing on the surface... by day and by night the country is flowing with fire, and the smoke of the ironworks hangs over it. There is a rumbling and clanking of iron forges and rolling mills. Workmen covered in smut, and with fierce white eyes, are seen moving amongst the glowing iron and dull thud of the forge-hammers.”

Living as a worker

The development of capitalism and industrial production had major consequences for the mass of ordinary people. The invention of power-driven machinery led to the concentration of production in bigger workplaces. Initially, large-scale workshops replaced the domestic unit, but by the mid nineteenth century, the factory system was fully in place. Labour became synchronised – beginning punctually and proceeding at a steady pace for a set number of hours on particular days of the week. Hierarchies of skill, training and wages developed around the specialised tasks of a more systematised division of labour. Workers responded by forming unions to fight collectively for better wages, working conditions and working hours, as well as to resist the dilution of their skills through further technological advancement. In pre-modern societies, financial remuneration had been only one of a number of strategies for achieving the means to live: much production was for subsistence or to fulfil non-monetary obligations. Under
the new conditions of industrial capitalism, a regular wage became crucial to the survival of the mass of the population. The wage de-personalised relations between employer and employee, turning the worker into abstract labour to be used as efficiently as possible in the pursuit of profit.

By the twentieth century, a conventional view of work was established that was very different from that of a hundred years before: it was waged, it took place outside the home, it was governed by the clock and it was performed predominantly by men. The household had lost much of the status it had enjoyed in pre-modern times as an arena of economic activity. This development contributed to the marginalisation of women from production. While pre-modern societies had also been characterised by significant social differences and inequalities, the economic conditions of industrial capitalism generated new kinds of social division. The separation of home and work helped to sharpen gender differences inside and outside the home: many (particularly wealthier) women were squeezed out of economic activity and left with a more clearly defined domestic role. Age divisions were heightened as children and the elderly were excluded from production and segregated socially. The fluid, impersonal relationships of capitalism also generated the modern class structure.

Capitalism proved to be organisationally and technologically dynamic, generating new experiences of work and encouraging the development of ever more sophisticated techniques for the management and control of labour. Employers increasingly engaged in the observation and regulation of their workers to maximise productivity and eliminate inefficiency. In the twentieth century, this was epitomised by the development of large-scale mass production pioneered by motor manufacturer Henry Ford, who used a moving assembly line to manufacture low-cost products for a mass market.

The new conditions of work increased output (Ford could make a car for a tenth of the cost of old-style craft production) but they also prompted considerable dissatisfaction and conflict. A recurring theme of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought was that a contradiction existed between the development of mechanical and human potential under industrial capitalism. A wide range of critics, from Karl Marx onwards, argued that modern work conditions were dehumanising (Meakin, 1976). The alienation and exploitation of industrial labour were not accepted passively, however: workers reacted both informally via sabotage, absenteeism, pilfering and day-dreaming, and, as we have seen, in a more organised fashion through trade unionism and other forms of political activity. This resistance in turn contributed to changing conditions of work.

BOX 2.1 Working for Ford

What is it like to work on an assembly line? In a classic study, Huw Beynon (1973) researched the lives of shopfloor workers at the Ford plant at Halewood on Merseyside in the late 1960s. The following quotes from his interviews give an indication of the monotony and estrangement experienced.

‘You don’t achieve anything here. A robot could do it. The line here is made for morons. It doesn’t need any thought. They tell you that. ‘We don’t pay you for thinking’, they say. Everyone comes to realise that they are not doing a worthwhile job. They’re just on the line. For the money. Nobody likes to think that they’re a failure. It’s bad when you know that you’re just a little cog. You just look at your pay packet – you look at what it does for your wife and kids. That’s the only answer.’ [p.114]

‘It’s different for them in the office. They’re part of Fords. We’re not, we’re just working here, we’re numbers.’ [p.121]

‘They decide on their measured day how fast we will work. They seem to forget that we’re not machines. . . . The standards they work to are excessive.’
anyway. They expect you to work the 480 minutes of the eight hours you’re on the clock. They’ve agreed to have a built-in allowance of six minutes for going to the toilet, blowing your nose and that. It takes you six minutes to get your trousers down.’ [p.135]

**QUESTION** Drawing on any of your own work experiences, to what extent were your working conditions similar to or different from those recounted by Beynon? What might account for the differences you have identified?

## Living as a consumer

Capitalism generated a consumer revolution as well as an industrial one. With industrialisation, the world of work was effectively split from the sphere of leisure in both spatial and temporal terms. With the advent of rail travel, day trips to the seaside became possible for the urban working classes as well as for the fashionable rich, and when holidays were made statutory, and later still were paid for by employers, annual holidays became part of an established pattern of conspicuous consumption of leisure (Meethan, 2001). In the cities, department stores became key sites for the display as well as the purchase of a diverse range of commodities, and music halls, bars and pubs, and later cinemas, all contributed to the development of a new, more glamorous and thoroughly commercial urban leisure culture. Mail order catalogues, billboards and public exhibitions combined with increases in the real value of the wage and the use of large-scale production to fuel consumer demand. The early twentieth century saw the birth of occupations such as design, marketing and advertising, all devoted to selling an increasing range and diversity of consumer goods.

The emergence of consumerism was not only about institutional change; it also involved shifts in attitudes and behaviour (Ewen and Ewen, 1982). One example of this was the way in which the practice of following new fashions in clothing, previously confined to elite groups, became commonplace. Increasingly, the choice of clothing, hairstyle and even body shape came to be seen as an expression of self. A crucial change in outlook was a growing interest in novelty – a willingness to reject existing goods and practices in favour of new ones (Campbell, 1992).

Some have argued that these developments amounted to the invention of the consumer. Certainly during the twentieth century, powerful forces sought to influence and shape consumer needs and desires. At the beginning of the twentieth century, producers consciously set out to create markets and audiences for their products, socialising consumers into new values and giving them the knowledge and competence to distinguish between goods. By its end, producers and retailers had developed advanced techniques such as market research for observing consumer behaviour and utilised the new science of psychology to sell goods more effectively (Bowlby, 1993).

In retrospect, the 1950s and 1960s were a golden era of mass consumption in the industrialised countries of the West. Across the developed world, sustained rises in real income contributed to the growth of leisure industries and to the spread of consumer goods such as cars, televisions and washing machines. The emergence of a consumer society was seen, however, as a disturbing development by some critics, because they felt it involved the manipulation and exploitation of the mass of ordinary people. Writers such as Theodor Adorno (1903–69), Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Herbert
Marcuse (1898–1979) from the Frankfurt School of critical theory drew on Marxist theories of alienation and ideology to argue that the rise of the culture industries and preoccupation with the acquisition of consumer goods posed a threat to individuality and independent, critical thought, producing what Marcuse (1964, p. 9) called ‘One Dimensional Man’: ‘People recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split level home, kitchen equipment’.

By portraying consumers merely as dupes or hedonists, such writers tended both to exaggerate the coherence and power of the messages of advertisers and marketers and to downplay the actual role and experience of consumer goods in modern social life. Items such as cars, washing machines and refrigerators were, for example, part of a major change in the running of households (Gershuny, 1983). Consumer goods also represented cultural as well as material resources, mediating relationships and embodying meaning. Conventions about clothing, for example, added up to a system of classification that involved differences in gender, age and class, recognised times of the day, week and year, and marked spaces and occasions. Clothes and other goods established and reflected distinctions between social groups (Bourdieu, 1984).

As this discussion implies, consumer goods became implicated in a whole range of social activities and cultural meanings in the modern era. While viewing consumption simply as a form of manipulation is simplistic, the growing involvement of industrial capitalism in these everyday practices is highly significant.

**BOX 2.2 Consumption as opposition?**

As we have seen, the term consumption is often associated with passivity. This can, however, blind us to the creativity of consumers. The varied ways in which we utilise goods often challenges the intentions of producers. In some cases, far from demonstrating conformity, they can express resistance to dominant structures and values. For example, youth subcultures have appropriated everything from the motor scooter of the Mods to the safety pin of the Punks to establish oppositional identities. Such is the dynamism of capitalism, however, that it has been able to reappropriate and sell this rebellion back as commodities, in profitable form.

The story of Napster offers a nice illustration of this. This apparently revolutionary website for the free trading of music amongst fans on the world wide web was the brainchild of a North American college student, Shaun Fanning, and two friends. Launched in June 1999, it was an instant and quite unprecedented success, allowing users to share digital music files and to follow up mutual musical interests in a quick, easy and dynamic way. Despite the fact that Napster actually had very little effect on record sales during its lifetime, the record industry was outraged at the potential loss of revenue from their traditional commercial channels and counter-attacked with legal action to stop what they saw as copyright violation on a massive scale. After a string of last-minute legal reprieves, Napster was shut down. In its wake, a number of subscription sources were launched by major record labels, none as comprehensive, and all effectively under the record industry’s control.

*Source: Guardian, 4 August 2001.*

**Living with rationality**

With hindsight, the intellectual revolution of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment was a crucial element of the Great Transformation. It instigated what has been called ‘the project of modernity’ (Habermas, 1987) by challenging religion, myth and tradition
and trumpeting a new belief in progress through knowledge and reason. How this change in the world of ideas altered the outlook and behaviour of ordinary people is open to question. Chapter 15 will describe how religious beliefs and institutions – albeit in distinctly modern forms – continue in the contemporary world. Nonetheless, in contrast to those which preceded them, modern societies are secular societies characterised by a belief in the power of rational thought.

For proponents of the modernist project, reason, particularly as manifested in science and technology, promised control of nature and society. Thinkers of the early modern era were convinced that progress in knowledge held the solution to all social ills: ‘The Golden Age of the human race is not behind us but before us; it lies in the perfection of the social order’ (Henri Saint-Simon, quoted in Kumar, 1978, p. 13).

This approach to social and political problems indicates a shift in outlook that is referred to as the growth of rationality. As we saw in the previous chapter, rationality involves the systematic pursuit of goals – finding the optimum means to a specified end. It is impersonal and preoccupied with technique, calculation, logic and control. In the early years of the twentieth century, sociologist Max Weber broke new ground when he argued that the key developments of the Great Transformation were, at heart, all manifestations of the growth of rationality. These were:

- The rise of science and academia, signalling the dominance of rational thought.
- Industrial manufacture involving the rationalisation of production.
- Capitalism, geared towards the calculated, systematic pursuit of profit.
- Codified law representing the rational organisation of justice.

Living in modernity therefore meant being subject to these rational forms of thought and rational social organisation. This is best illustrated by referring to the example of rationality that particularly preoccupied Weber – bureaucracy.

Bureaucracies are the essence of a modern form of organisation – think of the complex hierarchies of government civil services, transnational corporations or even educational establishments. They are large impersonal organisations in which power lies with the institutional structure rather than with the individuals who people it. Bureaucracies involve the specialisation of tasks with clear demarcations of authority and formal rules and regulations. In the modern world, we are subject to the discipline of bureaucracies as employees with clear sets of duties and responsibilities, and we are expected to subsume our own feelings and interests to those of the organisation. We also have to deal with impersonal bureaucratic structures as citizens and consumers. These systems of rational thought and organisation can be inhuman or dehumanising, and, ironically, in some circumstances they can be irrational and inefficient – as anyone who has been tangled in red tape will testify.

**BOX 2.3 The McDonaldisation of society?**

Max Weber viewed bureaucracy as the ultimate manifestation of rationality in social organisation. American sociologist George Ritzer [1993] argues that in the contemporary world the fast-food restaurant is a more appropriate model for the influence of rationalisation. In 1991, it was estimated that the leading one hundred restaurant chains operated 110 000 outlets in the US alone – that is, one per 2250 Americans. According to Ritzer, the success of these chains is based on the four key elements of ‘McDonaldisation’:

- Efficiency: economies of scale, assembly-line production of food and limited
Rational forms of thought and organisation may be defining features of modernity but our relationships with them are far from straightforward, as we have seen. This is particularly apparent when we consider people’s experiences of two areas of modern life that are often said to epitomise the triumph of reason and rationality: science and technology.

During the twentieth century, science became a huge undertaking, and technologies grew rapidly in pervasiveness, scale and power. Scientific knowledge and technological systems have played a pivotal role in transforming the natural world into a created environment subject to human coordination and control. The size and complexity of these systems means, however, that our ability as individuals to shape or even understand them is compromised. It is an inevitable consequence of modern life that people use technologies such as electricity, medicines and computers without really understanding how they work. As we saw in the previous chapter, we have to trust the claims of scientific knowledge and take the advice of technical experts. A striking illustration of this is the way we hand our bodies over to doctors.
In pre-modern societies, people could only be unwell if they felt unwell, and many sources of danger to health – such as the Black Death, which wiped out around a third of the English population in the fourteenth century – were seen as beyond human control – as ‘Acts of God’. Although, over the centuries, people who were in a position to call a doctor did so, they did not have high expectations of what could be achieved. Medicine typically achieved little and carried little prestige or power (Porter, 1999).

However, with the rise of scientific understanding (Louis Pasteur’s theory of the relationship between bacteria and infectious diseases being one major milestone), medicine became more effective and was the focus of rising expectations. It also assumed the mantle of professional expertise. Thus, the invention and popularisation of as simple an instrument as the stethoscope (invented by a Frenchman called Laennec in 1816) made it possible for doctors to ‘see’ beyond the patient’s story into the patient’s body. No longer was the patient the main authority on his or her own state of wellbeing: it had become possible to be diagnosed as seriously ill and yet feel fine (Duffin, 1999).

Conventional accounts of modernity portray the pre-eminence of science and technology as evidence of the triumph of reason over religion and superstition. Science was seen as expert, non-political and above all progressive. But the belief that society’s ills could be stamped out by scientific advances proved hugely over-optimistic. Medicine and improved sanitation did control infectious diseases such as smallpox, scarlet fever and tuberculosis for a time in the West. But some are resurgent – tuberculosis notifications rose by 20 per cent in England between 1988 and 1998, for example (Baggott 2000); others, such as influenza and malaria, have developed more resistant strains; and new infectious diseases have also broken out. HIV/AIDS is one such: it is estimated that some 32 million adults and 1.2 million children have been infected worldwide, of whom 23 million live in Sub-Saharan Africa and have very limited or no access to the therapeutic drugs now available on the market.

Add to these concerns other major threats to modern life resulting from scientific and technological developments – nuclear, chemical and biological warfare, global warming and large-scale pollution – and it is no wonder that we feel a new anxiety about science and technology. Here lies a paradox of contemporary life: we are at once more dependent on science and technology than ever before and are, at the same time, more aware than ever of their limitations.

BOX 2.4 Technological futures: fact and fiction

One illustration of our ambivalent relationship with technology is the way in which the Internet, the latest in a long line of developments to prompt utopian and anti-utopian visions of a world transformed by technology, has engendered powerful hopes and fears for the future. Technological advances have often been portrayed as routes to heaven or hell – a source of deliverance or damnation. The popularity of science fiction is another indicator of the power that technology holds in the modern world. The links between science fiction and science fact are interesting. For example, before he was employed by the US space
During the Great Transformation, people in the West became subject to a new form of authority: the nation-state. National government was not only a product but also a carrier of modernisation. The nation-state took a variety of forms – totalitarian and democratic – but in every case it claimed ultimate control over a bounded geographical territory. In doing so, it established an unprecedented position of power and influence over its population.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the state played an increasingly important part in ordinary people’s lives. For example:

- Through codified systems of civil and criminal law, it claimed the ultimate right to judge and punish wrongdoing and to mediate disputes between individuals. The state disciplined people through incarceration in new prisons and asylums, and, in some cases, it was prepared to kill those who transgressed its laws. It sought to regulate not only public conduct but also private behaviour by, for example, policing sexual activity and childrearing.

- The government also established a key role in economic life, either by taking control of production out of the hands of capitalists or by establishing a close relationship with them. One consequence of this was that the state became the largest employer in modern societies.

- The state also claimed the right to regulate what its citizens should have access to in the case of media outlets. Forms of regulation ranged from outright censorship to more subtle means of denying individuals the right to view, read or listen to what they wanted.

- National systems of education and welfare meant, for example, that all children were required to attend school and that people in poverty could expect some aid from the state.

As this list suggests, the nation-state has developed a role that is at once coercive and supportive of its people. Sometimes both elements coexist within the same function. For example, welfare systems, by starting from the assumption that everyone in a nation’s population has the right to a minimum standard of living, enshrine the idea of social citizenship, but they have another side that is about maintaining the work ethic and disciplining ‘the underserving poor’ (Morris, 1994).

The development of the modern state was an element of the rationalisation story: the reach and power of modern government rested on new, impersonal, bureaucratic forms of organisation. The state’s authority was maintained through a mixture of force and consent. It exercised a monopoly of coercive power within its borders, engaging in the surveillance of and, if necessary, violence against its people. Through control of both
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material resources and information, it sought influence over their thoughts and actions. Highly significant was the way in which subjects of the state were reconstituted as ‘citizens’ who shared a common destiny. Nationalism – loyalty to the nation-state – became a potent source of identity and a justification for behaving with great brutality. One aspect of this was summed up by George Orwell, writing in Britain during the Second World War and quoted in Bauman (1989, p.ii):

“As I write, highly civilised beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me. They do not feel any enmity to me as an individual, nor I against them. They are only ‘doing their duty’, as the saying goes. Most of them, I have no doubt, are kind-hearted law-abiding men who would never dream of committing murder in private life. On the other hand, if one of them succeeds in blowing me to pieces with a well-placed bomb, he will never sleep the worse for it. He is serving his country, which has the power to absolve him for evil.”

As this example suggests, a striking illustration of the authority of the state is the way it has mobilised its citizens for war. Thanks chiefly to the developments in industrial production, rational organisation and science and technology, warfare in the modern era has been of a scale and ferocity previously unknown. It is estimated that as many as 187 million people – civilians as well as soldiers – were killed in wars during the twentieth century (Hobsbawm, 1994). Even in times of peace, nation-states have demonstrated a huge commitment to armies and arms. At times of war they have organised all human and economic resources at their disposal in order to fight other states.

BOX 2.5 Modernity and the Holocaust

There is no greater testimony to the potential power and destructiveness of the modern state than the millions who died at the hands of totalitarian governments during the twentieth century. The Holocaust – the attempt during the Second World War by the Nazi-controlled German state to eradicate the Jewish population of Europe – is an horrific example of this. Between five and six million Jews were killed by the Nazis as part of a wider programme of genocide against Slavs, Gypsies, the mentally ill, the disabled, homosexuals and political opponents.

The Holocaust was rooted in anti-Semitism, which had a history stretching back to the Middle Ages. ‘The Final Solution’ [the Nazi euphemism for the genocide of the Jews] was, however, a phenomenon of modernity, according to a number of sociologists. It was made possible by the scientific, technological and political developments discussed above. A historian of the death camps writes:

‘[Auschwitz] was . . . 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. In the gas chambers the victims inhaled noxious gas generated by prussic acid pellets, which were produced by the advanced chemical industry of Germany. Engineers designed the crematoria; managers designed the system of bureaucracy that worked with zest and efficiency more backward nations would envy. Even the overall plan itself was a reflection of the modern scientific spirit gone awry. What we witnessed was nothing less than a massive scheme of social engineering’ (Feingold, quoted in Bauman, 1989, p. 8).

As this quotation vividly suggests, the Holocaust was rationally planned and carried out by a bureaucratic apparatus that was sponsored by a powerful centralised state. Initially, the killing...
Living in public and private

If some developments of modernity grouped people into anonymous masses, then others contributed to a heightened feeling of individuality and self-consciousness. The complexity and flux of the modern social environment presented people with new problems and opportunities as they attempted to do two fundamental things – interact with others and maintain an identity. Relationships in pre-modern times took place in comparatively small-scale and stable contexts and rested on clear notions of social position, grounded, for example, in kinship or feudal hierarchies. The following trends have all contributed to a transformation in the ways in which people are sociable:

- The dynamic character of modernity has undermined custom and tradition as a grounding of social relationships, forcing us to reflect on and re-evaluate our contacts with others. One element of this is that there is now less emphasis on ascribed or inherited status when defining who people are and more emphasis on actively selected or achieved social positions.

- Many social practices in pre-modern societies rested on the relative similarity of background and outlook of all participants. Modern societies are far more diverse, and our individual experiences are unlike those with whom we come into daily contact. Living in modernity therefore requires us to deal with people who are different from ourselves.

- In comparison with earlier social forms, there is a greater level of complexity and specialisation in modern societies. The range of social roles has grown rapidly.

- In pre-modern societies, ‘others’ could be clearly categorised either as familiar or as strangers. Living in modernity requires a more subtle range of stances towards the many people we come across. For example, even when we choose not to engage with...
those we meet in passing on the street, in a bar or at college, we must manage that non-contact by maintaining a stance of ‘civil indifference’ (Goffman, 1969).

- Modern life is characterised by a great number of impersonal relationships, particularly those governed by formal rules where contact is not really with an individual but with their bureaucratic rank or professional status. A vast array of social interactions come into this category, such as those between welfare officer and claimant, bus driver and passenger, doctor and patient, and so on.

**Connections** For a fuller account of the idea of life-worlds, see the section on phenomenology in Chapter 18, pages 504–5.

**Living in public**

Urbanisation was also a crucial dimension of the making of modern societies. Industrialisation fuelled the growth of urban centres as large numbers of people migrated from the countryside to the city in search of work. For example, in 1810, 20 per cent of the British population lived in towns and cities; a hundred years later, the figure had risen to 80 per cent (Kumar, 1978). Cities changed qualitatively as well as quantitatively. Their unprecedented scale and complexity required new levels of planning and organisation. In contrast with the irregular, twisting street of medieval cities, shaped by the contours of the land, industrial cities were increasingly characterised by broader, straighter streets that were more suitable for the growing

**Figure 2.2** With a population of about 18 million, Sao Paulo is the fourth largest city in the world. Originally founded in 1554 as a colonial settlement, it began to grow around 1850, gaining wealth from surrounding coffee plantations. Its population first exceeded one million in 1928, and large-scale redevelopment of the centre took place in the 1930s to address the pressure of rapid growth.
volume of commercial traffic, and more regular plots of land that, as Mumford (1961) has pointed out, were shaped by the interests of developers looking to make a profit from their purchase and sale.

Many commentators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggested that urbanisation produced a new kind of social as well as a physical environment. Ferdinand Tonnies (1855–1936), for example, argued that urbanisation transformed the basis and character of social contacts. He charted a shift from Gemeinschaft or community, characterised by close-knit, personal and stable relationships between friends and neighbours and based on a clear understanding of social position, to Gesellschaft or association, based on transitory, instrumental relationships that were specific to a particular setting and purpose and, in this sense, did not involve the whole person. Similar themes are evident in the writings of Georg Simmel (1858–1918), who described the emergence of a district urban personality. He argued that the pace, complexity and segmentation of modern life increased the number of non-intimate, standard relationships, such as those based on legal rules or the exchange of money. It also fostered a more calculating and self-conscious state of mind, with city dwellers often adopting a blasé attitude towards the multiplicity of sights and people they encountered. In other words, city life produced both a greater sense of individuality and a sharper sense of detachment.

The fluid, large-scale and often impersonal character of modern societies renders impression management – how we present ourselves to others – a highly significant but problematic endeavour. Difficulties arise out of ‘the pluralisation of lifeworlds’ – a diversification of both the contexts of social interaction and the types of encounter that can take place (Berger, 1974). This puts a strain on our skills of what Erving Goffman (1969) calls ‘self-presentation’. Goffman argues that acting is an appropriate metaphor for the conduct of modern life, since it requires us to play a variety of roles, each with a different stage and script. He highlights some of the problems of identity we face in the modern world. In the kind of social environment described above, people are forced to reflect constantly on who they are and how they fit into the world around them.

**QUESTIONS**

How many people have you made contact with in the last 24 hours? What was the nature of those contacts? What proportion could be described as intimate? What do your answers to these questions suggest about the nature of living in modernity?

**BOX 2.6 Public and private worlds: the impact of mass media**

The development of mass media, notably books, newspapers, cinema and broadcasting, offered a new kind of public sphere. For example, it was a major factor in establishing nations as ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983). Mass media allowed people to participate in events and communities over long distances. One has only to think of modern democratic elections, World Cup soccer, national lotteries or royal weddings to realise the intensity with which we can share in these electronically mediated events, as ‘one people’.

Interestingly, the most powerful contemporary media span the public and the private. Television, radio and newspapers bring the outside world into our homes. The times of programmes also help to set the routine of life within the home, and their content provides us with something to talk about around the dinner table – that is if we are not eating in front of the TV! The Internet has the opposite effect, allowing the individual (usually) to gain access to a wealth of information, entertainment and pleasure from anywhere in the world at any time of day or night.
Being private

Early analysts of the Great Transformation viewed developments such as urbanisation, industrialisation and the growth of bureaucracy as giving rise to a society of impersonal relationships. This, however, was only part of the story: intimacy and familiarity did not disappear but instead became compartmentalised in a new private sphere. In fact, an important element of modernity was a sharper distinction between the public and private worlds. Nowhere was this more apparent than in attitudes towards home, family and marriage.

In some respects, modernity limited the role of the household. Industrial capitalism robbed it of much of its productive function, separating resting-place and workplace. Other changes, such as the establishment of formal education systems, took away some of the family’s traditional economic functions.

The modern home may have been screened from the outside world by ideas of privacy but this does not mean that it has been unaffected by public pressures. Housing design in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected the distinction between public and private, and between masculine and feminine space, with the front of the house being kept for ‘best’ even in small, working-class terraced houses where space was at a premium. The parlour, for example, was kept for formal entertaining and displayed the socio-economic status of the household, while everyday domestic activities took place in the female sphere at the back of the house, where the children were also confined (Madigan and Munro, 1991).

New domestic technologies – time-saving devices such as the vacuum cleaner – also created new pressures for women, who bore responsibility for domestic labour and presenting a ‘respectable face’ to other members of the local community. Carolyn Steedman (1986, p.36) recalls how, at a young age in a working-class household, ‘I liked the new vacuum cleaner at first, because it meant no longer having to do the stairs with a stiff brush. But in fact it added to my Saturday work because I was expected to clean more with the new machine’.

**Figure 2.3** The increasing range and popularity of domestic gadgets in the 1950s did little to change perceptions about who was responsible for housework.
of the household’s responsibility for socialising the young. Far from withering away, however, the household was given a new significance as ‘home’, thanks largely to a domestic ideal that portrayed the family as a crucial site of intimacy (Crow and Allen, 1990). In the words of one of its supporters, the modern family came to be viewed as ‘a haven in a heartless world’ – a source of support and security in an often impersonal and threatening social environment (Lasch, 1979). However, some critics argue that the modern preoccupation with the intimate family is itself ‘anti-social’, sucking life out of the world that lies beyond the boundaries of home: ‘As a bastion against a bleak society it has made that society bleak’ (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982, p. 80).

Home life often fails to live up to the aspirations of the domestic ideal. Feminists have shown how notions of privacy have masked violence, abuse and exploitation. They also point out that the modern household depends on the unending labour of women, which, thanks to ideologies of domesticity and motherhood, has not been fully acknowledged or rewarded.

The issue of gender and domesticity has been high on the feminist agenda in the study of the family. For an account of this, see Chapter 9, pages 248–53, and Chapter 6, pages 141–3.

Living in postmodernity?

So far we have focused on the development of modern social forms and their impact on everyday experience over an extensive time period. We have seen how the global processes of modernity have reworked all aspects of social life, transforming patterns of social behaviour and people’s perception of themselves and their relationships with others. The defining characteristics of the modern experience have been diversity and dynamism. Since the 1970s, however, new social trends have prompted some commentators to suggest that another Great Transformation is under way – heralding an era of post-modernity (Lyotard, 1984; Bauman, 1989). We shall discuss this much contested claim in later chapters of this book, and particularly in Chapter 19, but it is worth considering here a number of recent changes that have provoked debate on the nature and future of modernity:

- Intellectual life is now dominated by a crisis of faith in the major modern ideas of science, progress and reason; individuals have lost their trust in the ability of science to give them answers.
- The world-wide development of capitalism has undermined the power of national governments and corporations to regulate economic life. The new international division of labour means that manufacturing now takes place on a global scale, with much industrial production being conducted outside the West. In Europe and the US, service-sector employment has become the mainstay of the post-industrial economy. Individual workers are now subject to global forces way beyond their and their managers’ control.
- The size of productive units has shrunk, and mass production has been replaced by more flexible systems that allow a greater range and faster turnover of goods. Mass marketing has similarly been replaced by niche marketing, and consumerism has stimulated a proliferation and multiplicity of identities and lifestyles.
- Rapid population growth and urbanisation is taking place in the Third World, while, in the First World, cities are in decline.

Postmodernity
For its supporters, the transformation of social, cultural, economic and political arrangements that has taken society beyond modernity.
Transnational economic, cultural and political activities are undermining the influence of the nation-state. Political ideas that once attracted the support of millions (such as conservatism, socialism) are being replaced by political opportunism and pragmatism, and by new social movements centred on social issues and identity politics.

A more diverse range of family forms has emerged, with new values of intimacy and more individualistic notions of selfhood.

What does this mean at the everyday level? At its most extreme, it means that postmodern individuals are no longer ‘unified subjects’, they no longer possess fixed, stable, permanent and coherent identities but are increasingly composed of fragmented, multiple and sometimes contradictory identities. The challenge that postmodernism presents to sociology is that postmodern social actors may either not wish to or are denied the opportunity to develop a coherent sense of self.

What is clear is that the interplay between modernity and its global dynamics, and postmodernity and identity have become of central interest to sociologists. Talk of the onset of postmodernity is further evidence that life in the contemporary world is as rapidly changing, exciting, threatening and disorientating as it has ever been. Many of the old certainties are going, forcing us to (re)evaluate social developments and our own place in them. This means that we require the skills and insights of sociology even more than ever, and in both the substantive and the more theoretical chapters of this book, we show how contemporary sociologists are developing new ways of exploring and making sense of society.

Chapter summary

- The onset of modernity unleashed processes of global proportion – notably the development of industrial capitalism, the dominance of rational forms of thought and organisation, the extended reach of the nation-state, and major changes in social relationships and in people’s sense of self – that had and continue to have a profound impact on the conduct of everyday life.
- A defining characteristic of modernity has been the continuing pace and scope of social change.
- The global processes of modernity have generated diverse local experiences.
- Some sociologists argue that we are now experiencing a second ‘great transformation’ as we move into the era of postmodernity.

Questions to think about

- The division of history into pre-modern and modern suggests a sharp contrast between then and now. To what extent do you think that pre-modern forms survive in the modern world? Give specific examples to support your answer.
- To what extent do you agree with Bauman’s suggestion that the Holocaust represented an advanced form of modernity? Give reasons for your response.
- In what ways could you be said to be living in a postmodern world? Provide examples from your own life to support your case.
Investigating further

A classic account of the experience of modernity. Well worth dipping into.

A particularly useful starting point for thinking about modernity, with an emphasis on how modern societies have developed, and clear and accessible chapters on the Enlightenment, the modern state, class and gender, culture and imperialism.

Like Berman, Jervis takes quite a cultural approach to modernity. You will find interesting chapters on imperialism, women, the urban experience, consumption, dress and so on.

Ritzer draws on Weber’s theories of rationalisation and bureaucracy to produce an insightful analysis of contemporary forms of doing business, based on the fast-food chain.
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