How to Survive the Modern World

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Introduction

Since the middle of the eighteenth century, beginning in Northern Europe and then spreading to every corner of the world, people have become aware of living in an age radically different from any other. With a mixture of awe and respect, trepidation and nostalgia, they have called this ‘the modern age’ or, more succinctly, ‘modernity’. We are now all inhabitants of modernity; every last hamlet and remote island has been touched by the outlook and ideology of a new era.

The story of our emergence into the modern world can be traced in politics, religion, art, technology, fashion, science — all of which have contributed to an alteration in consciousness, to a change in the way we think and feel. Becoming modern has involved changes across many parts of our lives.

Bumper V-2 Launch, 1950

1 —— Secularisation

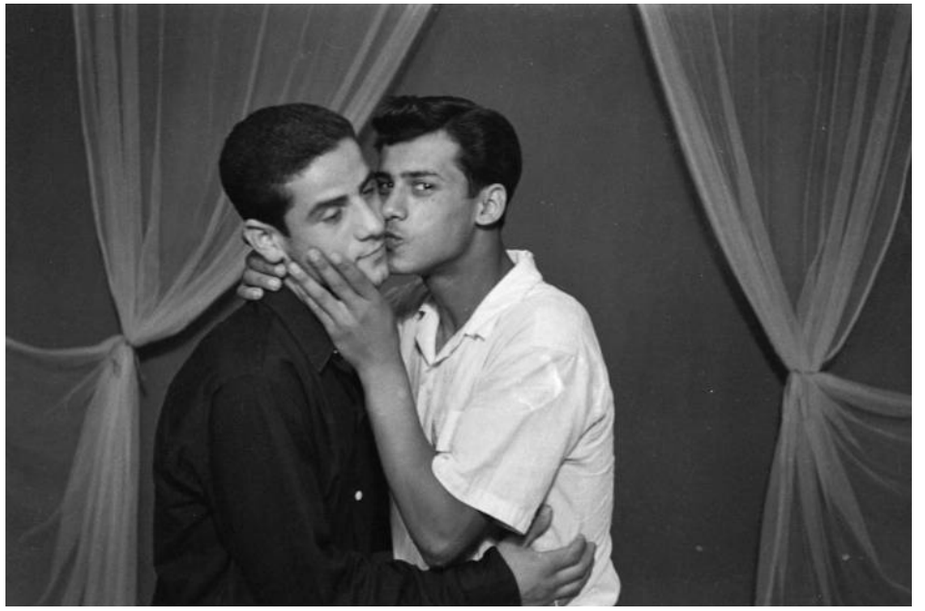
Perhaps the single greatest marker of modernity has been a loss of faith — the loss of a belief in the intervention of divine forces in earthly affairs. All other ages before our own held that our lives were at least half in the hands of gods or spirits, who could be influenced through prayer and sacrifice and who required complex forms of worship and obedience. But we have increasingly put our energies into understanding natural events through reason: there are no more omens or revelations, curses or prophecies; our futures will be worked out in laboratories, not temples. Even the nominally religious will demur to highly trained physicists and cancer specialists. God has died and modernity has killed Him.

2 —— Progress

Pre-modern societies envisaged history in cyclical terms: there was no forward dynamic to speak of; one imagined that things would always be as bad or as good as they had ever been. There was no more change in human affairs than there was in the seasons. Empires would wax and wane; periods of plenty would alternate with seasons of dearth, yet the fundamentals would remain. To be modern is to believe that we can continually surpass what has come before: national wealth, knowledge, technology, political arrangements and, most broadly, our capacity for fulfilment, seem capable of constant increase. We have severed the chains of repetitive suffering. Time is not a wheel of futility; it is an arrow pointing towards a perfectible future.

3 —— Science

We have replaced gods with equations. Science will give us mastery over ourselves, over the puzzles of nature, and ultimately over death. Dense calculations and the electrical spasms inside microscopic circuits will allow us to map and know the universe. It is only a matter of time before we work out how to be immortal.



Akram Zaatari, *Tarho and El Masri*, 1958.

Gustave Caillebotte, *Le Pont de l'Europe*, 1876.

4 —— Individualism

To be modern is to throw off the claims of history, precedent and community. We will fashion our own identities rather than being defined by families or tradition. We will choose who to marry, what job to pursue, what gender to identify as, where to live and how to think. We can be free and, at last, fully 'ourselves'.

5 —— Love

We are Romantics; that is, we seek a soulmate, an exemplary friend who can at the same time be an intrepid sexual partner, a reliable co-parent and a kindly colleague. We are in revolt against coldness and emotional distance. We refuse to remain in unhappy unions that no longer possess the sense of connection of the early moments. We will move boulders to find a spiritual twin.

6 —— Cities

We have had enough of the narrowness of village life. We don't want to go to bed when the sun sets or limit our acquaintances to the characters we went to school with. We want to move — along with eighty-five per cent of the population of modern nations — to the brightly illuminated city, where we can mingle in crowds, observe faces on underground trains, try out unfamiliar foods, change jobs, read in parks, rethink our hair, visit museums and sleep with strangers.

7 —— Work

We are modern because we work not only to earn money, but to develop our individuality, to exercise our distinctive talents and to find our true selves. We are on a quest for something our ancestors would have thought paradoxical: work we can love.

8 — Nature

Pre-modern people lived in close proximity to nature; they knew how to recognise shepherd's purse and make something edible out of pineapple weed. They could tell when sparrows showed up and what sounds short-eared owls make. They venerated nature as one might a deity. But moderns don't tremble before the night sky or feel a need to give thanks to the rising sun. We have freed ourselves from our previous awe at natural phenomena; we are alive to the sublimity of technology rather than of waterfalls. The emblematic modern locale is the twenty-four-hour supermarket, brightly lit and teeming with the produce of the seven continents, proudly defying the barriers of geography and of the night. We will eat pomegranates from Jamaica and dates from the Sahel.

9 — Speed

For most of history, our maximum speed was set by the constraints of our own feet, or at best, the velocity of a horse or a sailing ship. It might take three weeks to tramp from London to Edinburgh; four months to sail from Southampton to Sydney. In eighteenth-century Spain, the majority of people died within twenty-five kilometres of where they had been born. Now, nowhere is further than twenty-six hours away and the Voyager 1 probe is hurtling at seventeen kilometres per second, 21.2 billion kilometres away from its launch planet, on its way to explore interstellar space.

Andreas Gursky,
May Day 5, 2006.

Much of the transformation of modernity has been exciting; thrilling, even. Fibre-optic cables ring the Earth, satellites guide us across cities, new ideas overthrow rigid assumptions, airports are conjured from the ground and colossal energies are unleashed by the Promethean forces of chemistry and physics. The word ‘modern’ still suggests a state of glamour, desire and aspiration.

But at the same time the advent of modernity has been a story of tragedy. We have bought our new freedoms at a very high price. We have never been so close to collective insanity or planetary extinction. Modernity has wreaked havoc on our inner and outer landscapes. We can pick up on aspects of the catastrophe in seven areas.

1 —— Failure

The late-nineteenth-century French sociologist Émile Durkheim first made the sobering discovery of an essential difference between traditional and modern societies. In the former, when people lived in small communities, when the course of one’s career was understood to lie in the hands of the gods, and when there were few expectations of individual fulfilment, at moments of failure, the agony knew bounds; reversal did not seem like a verdict on one’s whole value as a human being. One never expected perfection, and did not respond with self-laceration when mishaps occurred. One simply fell to one’s knees and implored the heavens. But Durkheim knew that modern societies exacted a far crueller toll on those who judged themselves to have failed. No longer could these unfortunates blame bad luck; no longer could they hope for redemption in a next world. It seemed as if there was only one person responsible and only one fitting response. As Durkheim showed, in perhaps the largest single indictment of modernity, suicide rates of advanced societies are up to ten times as high as those in traditional ones. Moderns aren’t only more in love with success, they are far more likely to kill themselves when they fail.

2 —— Neurasthenia

This word was coined in the mid-nineteenth century to describe a distinctive malady of the mind felt to have been bred by the modern condition. Also known as ‘American nervousness’, it was associated with living in cities, with being shaken by crowds, overstimulated by newspapers, exhausted by choice, cut off from nature and driven frenetic by expectations. Multiple cures were offered: cold baths, compresses, walks in the country, mild electrocution, tight belts around the midriff, a vegetable-only diet and long periods of silence. The cures may have been fanciful, but the disease was accurate enough in its outlines, because to be modern is to be robbed of any sustained capacity for calm. It is to be assailed at all times with news of every latest beheading, bank run, government fiasco, film premiere, mass

shooting, guerrilla movement, nuclear mishap and sexual indiscretion to have occurred anywhere on the planet in the preceding minutes. We are always connected and always aware. The average twelve-year-old has access to 200 million more books than Shakespeare had. The last person who could theoretically have read everything died in around 1450. We know so much and understand so little.

3 —— Nostalgia

Modernity, so keen to wipe away all that came before it, has unleashed a torrent of nostalgia. Never before have so many longed to have lived in an age other than their own. While benefiting from modern dentistry and communications, they have nevertheless dreamt of absconding to a castle in the time of Charlemagne or a stone cottage in the days of King Arthur. Modernity has bred elaborate fantasies of 'simpler' lives on South Sea islands, Native American teepees and Arabian medinas. These longings might not be plans for real-world action, but they are telling ways of letting out a sigh at the depredations of our era.

4 —— Envy

Modernity has told us that we are all equal and can achieve anything: boundless possibility awaits every one of us. We too might start a billion-dollar company, become a famous actor, or run a nation. No longer is opportunity unfairly restricted to a favoured few. It sounds charitable but it is a fast route to an outbreak of comparison and its associated pain: envy. It would never have occurred to a goat herder in seventeenth-century Picardy to envy Louis XIV of France; the king's advantages were as unfair as they were beyond emulation. Such peace is no longer possible. In a world in which everyone can achieve what they deserve, why do we not have more? If success is merited, why do we remain mediocre? The psychological burden of a so-called ordinary life is incomparably harder, even as its material advantages have become ever more available.

Berthe Morisot, *Julie Daydreaming*, 1894.

Digne Meller-Marcovicz,
Martin Heidegger at his hut,
Southern Germany, 1968.

5 — Loneliness

In a practical sense, modernity has connected us to others like never before, but it has also left us emotionally bereft, perhaps late at night, on our own, in a corner of a diner, like a figure in an Edward Hopper painting, staring out at the darkness within and without. The belief that we deserve one special person has rendered our relationships unnecessarily fractious and devoid of tolerance or forbearance and stripped friendship of its value. The first question we are asked in every new social encounter is 'What do you do?' and we know how much an impressive answer matters. We fall asleep in high-rise apartments with views onto the distant headquarters of banks and insurance firms and wonder if anyone would notice if we died.

6 — Huts

Not coincidentally, many of the leading figures in the intellectual history of modernity have retreated to isolated dwellings in which to take distance from, and attempt to make sense of, the chaos: Nietzsche to a hut in the Swiss Alps, Wittgenstein to a hut in a Norwegian fjord, Heidegger to a hut in the Black Forest. Their writings may not have been typical, but their inner dislocations were. We may not have huts, but we sharply suspect how much we might need them.

7 — Sentimentality

If it were not already so difficult, we are asked to smile continually, to have a nice day, to have fun, to cheer on holiday and to be exuberant that we are alive. Modernity has stripped us of our primordial right to feel melancholy, unproductive, surly and confused. It has done us the central injustice of insisting that happiness should be the norm. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno remarked that modern America had produced one overwhelming villain: that cheerleader-in-chief, Walt Disney.

Though modernity may have made us materially abundant, it has imposed a heavy emotional toll. It has alienated us, bred envy, increased shame, separated us from one another, bewildered us, forced us to grin inauthentically and left us restless and enraged.

Fortunately, we do not need to suffer alone. Though it presents itself to each one of us as a personal affliction, our condition is the work of an age, not of our own minds. By learning to diagnose our condition, we can come to accept that we are not so much individually demented as living in times of unusually intense and societally generated perturbance. We can accept that modernity is a kind of disease and that understanding it will be the cure.

Edward Hopper,
Compartment C, Car 293, 1938.