

The Consequences of Modernity

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I

Introduction

In what follows I shall develop an institutional analysis of modernity with cultural and epistemological overtones. In so doing, I differ substantially from most current discussions, in which these emphases are reversed. What is modernity? As a first approximation, let us simply say the following: “modernity” refers to modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence. This associates modernity with a time period and with an initial geographical location, but for the moment leaves its major characteristics safely stowed away in a black box.

Today, in the late twentieth century, it is argued by many, we stand at the opening of a new era, to which the social sciences must respond and which is taking us beyond modernity itself. A dazzling variety of terms has been suggested to refer to this transition, a few of which refer positively to the emergence of a new type of social system (such as the “information society” or the “consumer society”) but most of which suggest rather that a

preceding state of affairs is drawing to a close (“post-modernity,” “post-modernism,” “post-industrial society,” “post-capitalism,” and so forth). Some of the debates about these matters concentrate mainly upon institutional transformations, particularly those which propose that we are moving from a system based upon the manufacture of material goods to one concerned more centrally with information. More commonly, however, these controversies are focused largely upon issues of philosophy and epistemology. This is the characteristic outlook, for example, of the author who has been primarily responsible for popularising the notion of post-modernity, Jean-François Lyotard.¹ As he represents it, post-modernity refers to a shift away from attempts to ground epistemology and from faith in humanly engineered progress. The condition of post-modernity is distinguished by an evaporating of the “grand narrative”—the overarching “story line” by means of which we are placed in history as beings having a definite past and a predictable future. The post-modern outlook sees a plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge, in which science does not have a privileged place.

A standard response to the sort of ideas expressed by Lyotard is to seek to demonstrate that a coherent epistemology is possible—and that generalisable knowledge about social life and patterns of social development can be achieved.² But I want to take a different tack. The disorientation which expresses itself in the feeling that systematic knowledge about social organisation cannot be obtained, I shall argue, results primarily from the sense many of us have of being caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seems in large part

outside of our control. To analyse how this has come to be the case, it is not sufficient merely to invent new terms, like post-modernity and the rest. Instead, we have to look again at the nature of modernity itself which, for certain fairly specific reasons, has been poorly grasped in the social sciences hitherto. Rather than entering a period of post-modernity, we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before. Beyond modernity, I shall claim, we can perceive the contours of a new and different order, which is “post-modern”; but this is quite distinct from what is at the moment called by many “post-modernity.”

The views I shall develop have their point of origin in what I have elsewhere called a “discontinuist” interpretation of modern social development.³ By this I mean that modern social institutions are in some respects unique—distinct in form from all types of traditional order. Capturing the nature of the discontinuities involved, I shall argue, is a necessary preliminary to analysing what modernity actually is, as well as diagnosing its consequences for us in the present day.

My approach also demands a brief critical discussion of some of the dominant standpoints in sociology, as the discipline most integrally involved with the study of modern social life. Given their cultural and epistemological orientation, the debates about modernity and post-modernity for the most part have not confronted the shortcomings in established sociological positions. An interpretation concerned mainly with institutional analysis, however, as my discussion is, must do so.

Using these observations as a springboard, in the bulk

of this study I shall attempt to provide a fresh characterisation both of the nature of modernity and of the post-modern order which might emerge on the other side of the current era.

The Discontinuities of Modernity

The idea that human history is marked by certain “discontinuities” and does not have a smoothly developing form is of course a familiar one and has been stressed in most versions of Marxism. My use of the term has no particular connection with historical materialism, however, and is not directed at characterising human history as a whole. There undoubtedly are discontinuities at various phases of historical development—as, for example, at the points of transition between tribal societies and the emergence of agrarian states. I am not concerned with these. I wish instead to accentuate that particular discontinuity, or set of discontinuities, associated with the modern period.

The modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from *all* traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion. In both their extensionality and their intensionality the transformations involved in modernity are more profound than most sorts of change characteristic of prior periods. On the extensional plane they have served to establish forms of social interconnection which span the globe; in intensional terms they have come to alter some of the most intimate and personal features of our day-to-day existence. Obviously there are continuities between the traditional and the modern, and neither is cut of whole cloth; it is well known how misleading it can be to contrast these two in

too gross a fashion. But the changes occurring over the past three or four centuries—a tiny period of historical time—have been so dramatic and so comprehensive in their impact that we get only limited assistance from our knowledge of prior periods of transition in trying to interpret them.

The long-standing influence of social evolutionism is one of the reasons why the discontinuist character of modernity has often not been fully appreciated. Even those theories which stress the importance of discontinuist transitions, like that of Marx, see human history as having an overall direction, governed by general dynamic principles. Evolutionary theories do indeed represent “grand narratives,” although not necessarily ones which are teleologically inspired. According to evolutionism, “history” can be told in terms of a “story line” which imposes an orderly picture upon the jumble of human happenings. History “begins” with small, isolated cultures of hunters and gatherers, moves through the development of crop-growing and pastoral communities and from there to the formation of agrarian states, culminating in the emergence of modern societies in the West.

Displacing the evolutionary narrative, or deconstructing its story line, not only helps to clarify the task of analysing modernity, it also refocuses part of the debate about the so-called post-modern. History does not have the “totalised” form attributed to it by evolutionary conceptions—and evolutionism, in one version or another, has been far more influential in social thought than the teleological philosophies of history which Lyotard and others take as their prime objects of attack. Deconstructing social evolutionism means accepting that history can-

not be seen as a unity, or as reflecting certain unifying principles of organisation and transformation. But it does not imply that all is chaos or that an infinite number of purely idiosyncratic "histories" can be written. There are definite episodes of historical transition, for example, whose character can be identified and about which generalisations can be made.⁴

How should we identify the discontinuities which separate modern social institutions from the traditional social orders? Several features are involved. One is the sheer *pace of change* which the era of modernity sets into motion. Traditional civilisations may have been considerably more dynamic than other pre-modern systems, but the rapidity of change in conditions of modernity is extreme. If this is perhaps most obvious in respect of technology, it also pervades all other spheres. A second discontinuity is the *scope of change*. As different areas of the globe are drawn into interconnection with one another, waves of social transformation crash across virtually the whole of the earth's surface. A third feature concerns the intrinsic *nature of modern institutions*. Some modern social forms are simply not found in prior historical periods—such as the political system of the nation-state, the wholesale dependence of production upon inanimate power sources, or the thoroughgoing commodification of products and wage labour. Others only have a specious continuity with pre-existing social orders. An example is the city. Modern urban settlements often incorporate the sites of traditional cities, and it may look as though they have merely spread out from them. In fact, modern urbanism is ordered according to quite different principles from those which set off the pre-modern city from the countryside in prior periods.⁵

Security and Danger, Trust and Risk

In pursuing my enquiry into the character of modernity, I want to concentrate a substantial portion of the discussion upon the themes of *security versus danger* and *trust versus risk*. Modernity, as everyone living in the closing years of the twentieth century can see, is a double-edged phenomenon. The development of modern social institutions and their worldwide spread have created vastly greater opportunities for human beings to enjoy a secure and rewarding existence than any type of pre-modern system. But modernity also has a sombre side, which has become very apparent in the present century.

On the whole, the "opportunity side" of modernity was stressed most strongly by the classical founders of sociology. Marx and Durkheim both saw the modern era as a troubled one. But each believed that the beneficent possibilities opened up by the modern era outweighed its negative characteristics. Marx saw class struggle as the source of fundamental schisms in the capitalistic order, but at the same time envisaged the emergence of a more humane social system. Durkheim believed the further expansion of industrialism would establish a harmonious and fulfilling social life, integrated through a combination of the division of labour and moral individualism. Max Weber was the most pessimistic among the three founding fathers, seeing the modern world as a paradoxical one in which material progress was obtained only at the cost of an expansion of bureaucracy that crushed individual creativity and autonomy. Yet even he did not fully anticipate how extensive the darker side of modernity would turn out to be.

To take an example, all three authors saw that modern industrial work had degrading consequences, subjecting many human beings to the discipline of dull, repetitive labour. But it was not foreseen that the furthering of the "forces of production" would have large-scale destructive potential in relation to the material environment. Ecological concerns do not brook large in the traditions of thought incorporated into sociology, and it is not surprising that sociologists today find it hard to develop a systematic appraisal of them.

A second example is the consolidated use of political power, particularly as demonstrated in episodes of totalitarianism. The arbitrary use of political power seemed to the sociological founders to belong primarily to the past (although sometimes having echoes in the present, as indicated in Marx's analysis of the rule of Louis Napoleon). "Despotism" appeared to be mainly characteristic of pre-modern states. In the wake of the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, Stalinism, and other episodes of twentieth-century history, we can see that totalitarian possibilities are contained within the institutional parameters of modernity rather than being foreclosed by them. Totalitarianism is distinct from traditional despotism, but is all the more frightening as a result. Totalitarian rule connects political, military, and ideological power in more concentrated form than was ever possible before the emergence of modern nation-states.⁶

The development of military power as a general phenomenon provides a further case in point. Durkheim and Weber both lived to witness the horrendous events of the First World War, although Durkheim died before the war reached its conclusion. The conflict shattered the antici-

pation Durkheim had previously held that a pacific, integrated industrial order would naturally be promoted by industrialism and proved impossible to accommodate within the intellectual framework he had developed as the basis of his sociology. Weber gave more attention to the role of military power in past history than did either Marx or Durkheim. Yet he did not elaborate an account of the military in modern times, shifting the burden of his analysis towards rationalisation and bureaucratisation. None of the classical founders of sociology gave systematic attention to the phenomenon of the "industrialisation of war."⁷

Social thinkers writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could not have foreseen the invention of nuclear weaponry.* But the connecting of industrial innovation and organisation to military power is a process that dates back to the early origins of modern industrialisation itself. That this went largely unanalysed in sociology is an indication of the strength of the view that the newly emergent order of modernity would be essentially pacific, in contrast to the militarism that had characterised previous ages. Not just the threat of nuclear confrontation, but the actuality of military conflict, form a basic part of the "dark side" of modernity in the current century. The twentieth century is the century of war, with

* Yet, writing in 1914, just before the outbreak of the Great War, H. G. Wells did make such a prediction, influenced by the physicist Frederick Soddy, a collaborator of Ernest Rutherford. Wells's book, *The World Set Free*, recounts the story of a war which erupts in Europe in 1958, from there spreading throughout the world. In the war, a terrible weapon is used, constructed from a radioactive substance called Carolinum. Hundreds of these bombs, which Wells called "atomic bombs," are dropped on the world's cities, causing immense devastation. A time of mass starvation and political chaos follows, after which a new world republic is set up, in which war is forever prohibited.

the number of serious military engagements involving substantial loss of life being considerably higher than in either of the two preceding centuries. In the present century thus far, over 100 million people have been killed in wars, a higher proportion of the world's population than in the nineteenth century, even allowing for overall population increase.⁸ Should even a limited nuclear engagement be fought, the loss of life would be staggering, and a full superpower conflict might eradicate humanity altogether.

The world in which we live today is a fraught and dangerous one. This has served to do more than simply blunt or force us to qualify the assumption that the emergence of modernity would lead to the formation of a happier and more secure social order. Loss of a belief in "progress," of course, is one of the factors that underlies the dissolution of "narratives" of history. Yet there is much more at stake here than the conclusion that history "goes nowhere." We have to develop an institutional analysis of the double-edged character of modernity. In so doing, we must make good some of the limitations of the classical sociological perspectives, limitations which have continued to affect sociological thought in the present day.

Sociology and Modernity

Sociology is a very broad and diverse subject, and any simple generalisations about it as a whole are questionable. But we can point to three widely held conceptions, deriving in some part from the continuing impact of classical social theory in sociology, which inhibit a satisfactory analysis of modern institutions. The first concerns the institutional diagnosis of modernity; the second has

to do with the prime focus of sociological analysis, "society"; the third relates to the connections between sociological knowledge and the characteristics of modernity to which such knowledge refers.

1. The most prominent theoretical traditions in sociology, including those stemming from the writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, have tended to look to a single overriding dynamic of transformation in interpreting the nature of modernity. For authors influenced by Marx, the major transformative force shaping the modern world is capitalism. With the decline of feudalism, agrarian production based in the local manor is replaced by production for markets of national and international scope, in terms of which not only an indefinite variety of material goods but also human labour power become commodified. The emergent social order of modernity is *capitalistic* in both its economic system and its other institutions. The restless, mobile character of modernity is explained as an outcome of the investment-profit-investment cycle which, combined with the overall tendency of the rate of profit to decline, brings about a constant disposition for the system to expand.

This viewpoint was criticised both by Durkheim and by Weber, who helped initiate rival interpretations that have strongly influenced subsequent sociological analysis. In the tradition of Saint-Simon, Durkheim traced the nature of modern institutions primarily to the impact of *industrialism*. For Durkheim, capitalistic competition is not the central element of the emerging industrial order, and some of the characteristics upon which Marx laid great stress he saw as marginal and transitory. The rapidly changing character of modern social life does not derive

essentially from capitalism, but from the energising impulse of a complex division of labour, harnessing production to human needs through the industrial exploitation of nature. We live, not in a capitalist, but in an industrial order.

Weber spoke of "capitalism," rather than the existence of an industrial order, but in some key respects his view is closer to Durkheim than to Marx. "Rational capitalism" as Weber characterizes it, comprises the economic mechanisms specified by Marx, including the commodification of wage labour. Yet "capitalism" in this usage plainly means something different from the same term as it appears in Marx's writings. "Rationalisation," as expressed in technology and in the organisation of human activities, in the shape of bureaucracy, is the keynote.

Do we now live in a capitalist order? Is industrialism the dominant force shaping the institutions of modernity? Should we rather look to the rationalised control of information as the chief underlying characteristic? I shall argue that these questions cannot be answered in this form—that is to say, we should not regard these as mutually exclusive characterisations. Modernity, I propose, is *multidimensional on the level of institutions*, and each of the elements specified by these various traditions plays some part.

2. The concept of "society" occupies a focal position in much sociological discourse. "Society" is of course an ambiguous notion, referring both to "social association" in a generic way and to a distinct system of social relations. I am concerned here only with the second of these usages, which certainly figures in a basic fashion in each of the dominant sociological perspectives. While Marxist authors may sometimes favour the term "social forma-

tion" over that of "society," the connotation of "bounded system" is similar.

In non-Marxist perspectives, particularly those connected with the influence of Durkheim, the concept of society is bound up with the very definition of sociology itself. The conventional definition of sociology with which virtually every textbook opens—"sociology is the study of human societies" or "sociology is the study of modern societies"—gives clear expression to this view. Few, if any, contemporary writers follow Durkheim in treating society in an almost mystical way, as a sort of "super-being" to which individual members quite properly display an attitude of awe. But the primacy of "society" as the core notion of sociology is very broadly accepted.

Why should we have reservations about the notion of society as ordinarily utilised in sociological thought? There are two reasons. Even where they do not explicitly say so, authors who regard sociology as the study of "societies" have in mind the societies associated with modernity. In conceptualising them, they think of quite clearly delimited systems, which have their own inner unity. Now, understood in this way, "societies" are plainly *nation-states*. Yet although a sociologist speaking of a particular society might casually employ instead the term "nation," or "country," the character of the nation-state is rarely directly theorised. In explicating the nature of modern societies, we have to capture the specific characteristics of the nation-state—a type of social community which contrasts in a radical way with pre-modern states.

A second reason concerns certain theoretical interpretations that have been closely connected with the notion of society. One of the most influential of these is that given

by Talcott Parsons.⁹ According to Parsons, the preeminent objective of sociology is to resolve the “problem of order.” The problem of order is central to the interpretation of the boundedness of social systems, because it is defined as a question of integration—what holds the system together in the face of divisions of interest which would “set all against all.”

I do not think it is useful to think of social systems in such a way.¹⁰ We should reformulate the question of order as a problem of how it comes about that social systems “bind” time and space. The problem of order is here seen as one of *time-space distancing*—the conditions under which time and space are organised so as to connect presence and absence. This issue has to be conceptually distinguished from that of the “boundedness” of social systems. Modern societies (nation-states), in some respects at any rate, have a clearly defined boundedness. But all such societies are also interwoven with ties and connections which crosscut the sociopolitical system of the state and the cultural order of the “nation.” Virtually no pre-modern societies were as clearly bounded as modern nation-states. Agrarian civilisations had “frontiers,” in the sense attributed to that term by geographers, while smaller agricultural communities and hunting and gathering societies normally shaded off into other groups around them and were not territorial in the same sense as state-based societies.

In conditions of modernity, the level of time-space distancing is much greater than in even the most developed of agrarian civilisations. But there is more than a simple expansion in the capability of social systems to span time and space. We must look in some depth at how modern institutions become “situated” in time and space

to identify some of the distinctive traits of modernity as a whole.

3. In various otherwise divergent forms of thought, sociology has been understood as generating knowledge about modern social life which can be used in the interests of prediction and control. Two versions of this theme are prominent. One is the view that sociology supplies information about social life which can give us a kind of control over social institutions similar to that which the physical sciences provide in the realm of nature. Sociological knowledge is believed to stand in an instrumental relation to the social world to which it relates; such knowledge can be applied in a technological fashion to intervene in social life. Other authors, including Marx (or, at least, Marx according to certain interpretations) have taken a different standpoint. For them, the idea of “using history to make history” is the key: the findings of social science cannot just be applied to an inert subject matter, but have to be filtered through the self-understandings of social agents.

This latter view is undeniably more sophisticated than the other, but it is still inadequate, since its conception of reflexivity is too simple. The relation between sociology and its subject matter—the actions of human beings in conditions of modernity—has to be understood instead in terms of the “double hermeneutic.”¹¹ The development of sociological knowledge is parasitical upon lay agents’ concepts; on the other hand, notions coined in the meta-languages of the social sciences routinely reenter the universe of actions they were initially formulated to describe or account for. But it does not lead in a direct way to a transparent social world. *Sociological knowledge spirals in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing*

both itself and that universe as an integral part of that process.

This is a model of reflexivity, but not one in which there is a parallel track between the accumulation of sociological knowledge on the one side and the steadily more extensive control of social development on the other. Sociology (and the other social sciences which deal with extant human beings) does not develop cumulative knowledge in the same way as the natural sciences might be said to do. Per contra, the “feed-in” of sociological notions or knowledge claims into the social world is not a process that can be readily channeled, either by those who propose them or even by powerful groups or governmental agencies. Yet the practical impact of social science and sociological theories is enormous, and sociological concepts and findings are constitutively involved in what modernity *is*. I shall develop the significance of this point in some detail below.

If we are adequately to grasp the nature of modernity, I want to argue, we have to break away from existing sociological perspectives in each of the respects mentioned. We have to account for the extreme dynamism and globalising scope of modern institutions and explain the nature of their discontinuities from traditional cultures. I shall come to a characterisation of these institutions later, first of all posing the question: what are the sources of the dynamic nature of modernity? Several sets of elements can be distinguished in formulating an answer, each of which is relevant both to the dynamic and to the “world-embracing” character of modern institutions.

The dynamism of modernity derives from the *separation of time and space* and their recombination in forms which permit the precise time-space “zoning” of social

life; the *disembedding* of social systems (a phenomenon which connects closely with the factors involved in time-space separation); and the *reflexive ordering and reordering* of social relations in the light of continual inputs of knowledge affecting the actions of individuals and groups. I shall analyse these in some detail (which will include an initial look at the nature of trust), beginning with the ordering of time and space.

Modernity, Time, and Space

To understand the intimate connections between modernity and the transformation of time and space, we have to start by drawing some contrasts with time-space relations in the pre-modern world.

All pre-modern cultures possessed modes of the calculation of time. The calendar, for example, was as distinctive a feature of agrarian states as the invention of writing. But the time reckoning which formed the basis of day-to-day life, certainly for the majority of the population, always linked time with place—and was usually imprecise and variable. No one could tell the time of day without reference to other socio-spatial markers: “when” was almost universally either connected with “where” or identified by regular natural occurrences. The invention of the mechanical clock and its diffusion to virtually all members of the population (a phenomenon which dates at its earliest from the late eighteenth century) were of key significance in the separation of time from space. The clock expressed a uniform dimension of “empty” time, quantified in such a way as to permit the precise designation of “zones” of the day (e.g., the “working day”).¹²

Time was still connected with space (and place) until

the uniformity of time measurement by the mechanical clock was matched by uniformity in the social organisation of time. This shift coincided with the expansion of modernity and was not completed until the current century. One of its main aspects is the worldwide standardisation of calendars. Everyone now follows the same dating system: the approach of the "year 2000," for example, is a global event. Different "New Years" continue to co-exist but are subsumed within a mode of dating which has become to all intents and purposes universal. A second aspect is the standardising of time across regions. Even in the latter part of the nineteenth century, different areas within a single state usually had different "times," while between the borders of states the situation was even more chaotic.¹³

The "emptying of time" is in large part the precondition for the "emptying of space" and thus has causal priority over it. For, as I shall argue below, coordination across time is the basis of the control of space. The development of "empty space" may be understood in terms of the separation of *space* from *place*. It is important to stress the distinction between these two notions, because they are often used as more or less synonymous with one another. "Place" is best conceptualised by means of the idea of locale, which refers to the physical settings of social activity as situated geographically.¹⁴ In pre-modern societies, space and place largely coincide, since the spatial dimensions of social life are, for most of the population, and in most respects, dominated by "presence"—by localised activities. The advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions

of modernity, place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the "visible form" of the locale conceals the distanced relations which determine its nature.

The dislocation of space from place is not, as in the case of time, closely bound up with the emergence of uniform modes of measurement. Means of reliably subdividing space have always been more readily available than means of producing uniform measures of time. The development of "empty space" is linked above all to two sets of factors: those allowing for the representation of space without reference to a privileged locale which forms a distinct vantage-point; and those making possible the substitutability of different spatial units. The "discovery" of "remote" regions of the world by Western travelers and explorers was the necessary basis of both of these. The progressive charting of the globe that led to the creation of universal maps, in which perspective played little part in the representation of geographical position and form, established space as "independent" of any particular place or region.

The separation of time from space should not be seen as a unilinear development, in which there are no reversals or which is all-encompassing. On the contrary, like all trends of development, it has dialectical features, provoking opposing characteristics. Moreover, the severing of time from space provides a basis for their recombination in relation to social activity. This is easily demonstrated by taking the example of the timetable. A timetable, such as a schedule of the times at which trains run,

might seem at first sight to be merely a temporal chart. But actually it is a time-space ordering device, indicating both when and where trains arrive. As such, it permits the complex coordination of trains and their passengers and freight across large tracts of time-space.

Why is the separation of time and space so crucial to the extreme dynamism of modernity?

First, it is the prime condition of the processes of disembedding which I shall shortly analyse. The separating of time and space and their formation into standardised, "empty" dimensions cut through the connections between social activity and its "embedding" in the particularities of contexts of presence. Disembedded institutions greatly extend the scope of time-space distancing and, to have this effect, depend upon coordination across time and space. This phenomenon serves to open up manifold possibilities of change by breaking free from the restraints of local habits and practices.

Second, it provides the gearing mechanisms for that distinctive feature of modern social life, the rationalised organisation. Organisations (including modern states) may sometimes have the rather static, inertial quality which Weber associated with bureaucracy, but more commonly they have a dynamism that contrasts sharply with pre-modern orders. Modern organisations are able to connect the local and the global in ways which would have been unthinkable in more traditional societies and in so doing routinely affect the lives of many millions of people.

Third, the radical historicity associated with modernity depends upon modes of "insertion" into time and space unavailable to previous civilisations. "History," as the systematic appropriation of the past to help shape the

future, received its first major stimulus with the early emergence of agrarian states, but the development of modern institutions gave it a fundamentally new impetus. A standardised dating system, now universally acknowledged, provides for an appropriation of a unitary past, however much such "history" may be subject to contrasting interpretations. In addition, given the overall mapping of the globe that is today taken for granted, the unitary past is one which is worldwide; time and space are recombined to form a genuinely world-historical framework of action and experience.

Disembedding

Let me now move on to consider the disembedding of social systems. By disembedding I mean the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space.

Sociologists have often discussed the transition from the traditional to the modern world in terms of the concepts of "differentiation" or "functional specialisation." The movement from small-scale systems to agrarian civilisations and then to modern societies, according to this view, can be seen as a process of progressive inner diversification. Various objections can be made to this position. It tends to be linked to an evolutionary outlook, gives no attention to the "boundary problem" in the analysis of societal systems, and quite often depends upon functionalist notions.¹⁵ More important to the present discussion, however, is the fact that it does not satisfactorily address the issue of time-space distancing. The notions of differentiation or functional specialisation are not well suited to handling the phenomenon of the brack-

eting of time and space by social systems. The image evoked by disembedding is better able to capture the shifting alignments of time and space which are of elementary importance for social change in general and for the nature of modernity in particular.

I want to distinguish two types of disembedding mechanisms intrinsically involved in the development of modern social institutions. The first of these I refer to as the creation of *symbolic tokens*; the second I shall call the establishment of *expert systems*.

By symbolic tokens I mean media of interchange which can be "passed around" without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them at any particular juncture. Various kinds of symbolic tokens can be distinguished, such as media of political legitimacy; I shall concentrate here upon the token of *money*.

The nature of money has been widely discussed in sociology and obviously forms an abiding concern of economics. In his early writings, Marx spoke of money as "the universal whore," a medium of exchange which negates the content of goods or services by substituting for them an impersonal standard. Money permits the exchange of anything for anything, regardless of whether the goods involved share any substantive qualities in common with one another. Marx's critical comments on money foreshadow his subsequent distinction between use-value and exchange-value. Money makes possible the generalisation of the second of these because of its role as a "pure commodity."¹⁶

The most far-reaching and sophisticated account of the connections between money and modernity, however, is that written by Georg Simmel.¹⁷ I shall return to this

shortly, since I shall draw upon it in my own discussion of money as a disembedding mechanism. In the meantime, it should be noted that a concern with the social character of money forms part of the writings of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann in more recent times. Parsons is the dominant author here. According to him, money is one of several types of "circulating media" in modern societies, others of which include power and language. Although the approaches of Parsons and Luhmann have some affinities with that which I shall set out below, I do not accept the main framework of their analyses. Neither power nor language is on a par with money or other disembedding mechanisms. Power and the use of language are intrinsic features of social action on a very general level, not specific social forms.

What is money? Economists have never been able to agree about an answer to this question. Keynes's writings, however, probably supply the best starting point. One of Keynes's main emphases is upon the distinctive character of money, the rigorous analysis of which separates his work from those versions of neo-classical economic thought in which, as Leon Walras puts it, "money does not exist."¹⁸ Keynes first of all distinguishes between money of account and money proper.¹⁹ In its early form, money is identified with debt. "Commodity money" thus designated is a first step along the way in the transformation of barter into a money economy. A basic transition is initiated when acknowledgments of debt can be substituted for commodities as such in the settlement of transactions. This "spontaneous acknowledgment of debt" can be issued by any bank and represents "bank money." Bank money is recognition of a private debt until it becomes more widely diffused. This movement to money

proper involves the intervention of the state, which acts as the guarantor of value. Only the state (which means here the modern nation-state) is able to transform private debt transactions into a standard means of payment—in other words, to bring debt and credit into balance in respect of an indefinite number of transactions.

Money in its developed form is thus defined above all in terms of credit and debt, where these concern a plurality of widely scattered interchanges. It is for this reason that Keynes relates money closely to time.²⁰ Money is a mode of deferral, providing the means of connecting credit and liability in circumstances where immediate exchange of products is impossible. Money, we can say, is a means of bracketing time and so of lifting transactions out of particular milieux of exchange. More accurately put, in the terms introduced earlier, money is a means of time-space distancing. Money provides for the enactment of transactions between agents widely separated in time and space. The spatial implications of money are well characterised by Simmel, who points out:

the role of money is associated with the spatial distance between the individual and his possession. . . . Only if the profit of an enterprise takes a form that can be easily transferred to any other place does it guarantee to property and the owner, through their spatial separation, a high degree of independence or, in other words, self-mobility. . . . The power of money to bridge distances enables the owner and his possessions to exist so far apart that each of them may follow their own precepts to a greater extent than in the period when the owner and his possessions still stood in a direct mutual relationship, when every economic engagement was also a personal one.²¹

The disembeddedness provided for in modern money economies is vastly greater than was the case in any of the

pre-modern civilisations in which money existed. Even in the most developed of monetary systems in the pre-modern era, such as that of the Roman Empire, no advance was made beyond what in Keynes's terms would be commodity money, in the shape of material coinage. Today, "money proper" is independent of the means whereby it is represented, taking the form of pure information lodged as figures in a computer printout. It is the wrong metaphor to see money, as Parsons does, as a circulating medium. As coinage or cash, money circulates; but in a modern economic order the large bulk of monetary transactions do not take this form. Cencini points out that the conventional ideas that money "circulates," and can be thought of as a "flow," are essentially misleading.²² If money flowed—say, like water—its circulation would be expressed directly in terms of time. It would follow from this that the greater the velocity, the narrower the stream needed for the same quantity to flow per unit of time. In the case of money, this would mean that the amount required for a given transaction would be proportional to the velocity of its circulation. But it is plainly nonsense to say that payment of £100 could equally well be carried out with £50 or £10. Money does not relate to time (or, more accurately, time-space) as a flow, but precisely as a means of bracketing time-space by coupling instantaneity and deferral, presence and absence. In R.S. Sayers's words, "No asset is in action as a medium of exchange except in the very moment of being transferred from one ownership to another, in settlement of some transaction."²³

Money is an example of the disembedding mechanisms associated with modernity; I shall not attempt to detail the substantive contribution of a developed money econ-

omy to the character of modern institutions. However, “money proper” is of course an inherent part of modern social life as well as a specific type of symbolic token. It is fundamental to the disembedding of modern economic activity generally. One of the most characteristic forms of disembedding in the modern period, for instance, is the expansion of capitalistic markets (including money markets), which are from relatively early on international in scope. “Money proper” is integral to the distanced transactions which these involve. It is also, as Simmel points out, essential to the nature of property ownership and alienability in modern economic activity.

All disembedding mechanisms, both symbolic tokens and expert systems, depend upon *trust*. Trust is therefore involved in a fundamental way with the institutions of modernity. Trust here is vested, not in individuals, but in abstract capacities. Anyone who uses monetary tokens does so on the presumption that others, whom she or he never meets, honour their value. But it is money as such which is trusted, not only, or even primarily, the persons with whom particular transactions are carried out. I shall consider the general character of trust a little later. Confining our attention for the moment to the case of money, we may note that the ties between money and trust are specifically noted and analysed by Simmel. Like Keynes he links trust in monetary transactions to “public confidence in the issuing government.”

Simmel distinguishes confidence in money from the “weak inductive knowledge” involved in many forward transactions. Thus if a farmer were not confident that a field would bear grain in the following year as in previous years, she or he would not sow. Trust in money involves

more than a calculation of the reliability of likely future events. Trust exists, Simmel says, when we “believe in” someone or some principle: “It expresses the feeling that there exists between our idea of a being and the being itself a definite connection and unity, a certain consistency in our conception of it, an assurance and lack of resistance in the surrender of the Ego to this conception, which may rest upon particular reasons, but is not explained by them.”²⁴ Trust, in short, is a form of “faith,” in which the confidence vested in probable outcomes expresses a commitment to something rather than just a cognitive understanding. Indeed, and I shall elaborate upon this later on, the modes of trust involved in modern institutions in the nature of the case rest upon vague and partial understandings of their “knowledge base.”

Let us now look at the nature of expert systems. By expert systems I mean systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today.²⁵ Most laypersons consult “professionals”—lawyers, architects, doctors, and so forth—only in a periodic or irregular fashion. But the systems in which the knowledge of experts is integrated influence many aspects of what we do in a *continuous* way. Simply by sitting in my house, I am involved in an expert system, or a series of such systems, in which I place my reliance. I have no particular fear in going upstairs in the dwelling, even though I know that in principle the structure might collapse. I know very little about the codes of knowledge used by the architect and the builder in the design and construction of the home, but I nonetheless have “faith” in what they have done. My “faith” is not so much in them, although I have

to trust their competence, as in the authenticity of the expert knowledge which they apply—something which I cannot usually check exhaustively myself.

When I go out of the house and get into a car, I enter settings which are thoroughly permeated by expert knowledge—involving the design and construction of automobiles, highways, intersections, traffic lights, and many other items. Everyone knows that driving a car is a dangerous activity, entailing the risk of accident. In choosing to go out in the car, I accept that risk, but rely upon the aforesaid expertise to guarantee that it is minimised as far as possible. I have very little knowledge of how the car works and could only carry out minor repairs upon it myself should it go wrong. I have minimal knowledge about the technicalities of modes of road building, the maintaining of the road surfaces, or the computers which help control the movement of the traffic. When I park the car at the airport and board a plane, I enter other expert systems, of which my own technical knowledge is at best rudimentary.

Expert systems are disembedding mechanisms because, in common with symbolic tokens, they remove social relations from the immediacies of context. Both types of disembedding mechanism presume, yet also foster, the separation of time from space as the condition of the time-space distancing which they promote. An expert system disembeds in the same way as symbolic tokens, by providing “guarantees” of expectations across distanced time-space. This “stretching” of social systems is achieved via the impersonal nature of tests applied to evaluate technical knowledge and by public critique (upon which the production of technical knowledge is based), used to control its form.

For the lay person, to repeat, trust in expert systems depends neither upon a full initiation into these processes nor upon mastery of the knowledge they yield. Trust is inevitably in part an article of “faith.” This proposition should not be oversimplified. An element of Simmel’s “weak inductive knowledge” is no doubt very often present in the confidence which lay actors sustain in expert systems. There is a pragmatic element in “faith,” based upon the experience that such systems generally work as they are supposed to do. In addition, there are often regulatory agencies over and above professional associations designed to protect the consumers of expert systems—bodies which licence machines, keep a watch over the standards of aircraft manufacturers, and so forth. None of this, however, alters the observation that all disembedding mechanisms imply an attitude of trust. Let me now consider how we might best understand the notion of trust and how trust connects in a general way to time-space distancing.

Trust

The term “trust” crops up quite often in ordinary language.²⁶ Some senses of the term, while they share broad affinities with other usages, are relatively slight in implication. A person who says “I trust you are well” normally means little more by the polite enquiry than “I hope you are in good health”—although even here “trust” carries a somewhat stronger connotation than “hope,” implying something closer to “I hope and have no reason to doubt.” The attitude of confidence or reliability which enters into trust in some more significant contexts is already to be found here. When someone says, “Trust X to behave

in that way," this implication is more pronounced, although not far beyond the level of "weak inductive knowledge." It is recognised that X can be relied upon to produce the behaviour in question, given appropriate circumstances. But these usages are not especially interesting for the matters at issue in the current discussion, because they do not refer to the social relations that incorporate trust. They do not relate to trust-perpetuating systems, but are designations referring to the behaviour of others; the individual involved is not called upon to display that "faith" which trust involves in its deeper meanings.

The main definition of "trust" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes it as "confidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing, or the truth of a statement," and this definition provides a useful starting point. "Confidence" and "reliance" are clearly somehow bound up with that "faith" of which, following Simmel, I have already spoken. While recognising that confidence and trust are closely allied, Luhmann makes a distinction between the two that is the basis of his work on trust.²⁷ Trust, he says, should be understood specifically in relation to risk, a term which only comes into being in the modern period.* The notion originated with the understanding that unanticipated results may be a consequence of our own activities or decisions, rather than expressing hidden meanings of nature or ineffable intentions of the Deity. "Risk" largely replaces what was previously thought of as *fortuna* (fortune or fate) and be-

*The word "risk" seems to have found its way into English in the seventeenth century and probably comes from a Spanish nautical term meaning to run into danger or to go against a rock.

comes separated from cosmologies. Trust presupposes awareness of circumstances of risk, whereas confidence does not. Trust and confidence both refer to expectations which can be frustrated or cast down. Confidence, as Luhmann uses it, refers to a more or less taken-for-granted attitude that familiar things will remain stable:

The normal case is that of confidence. You are confident that your expectations will not be disappointed: that politicians will try to avoid war, that cars will not break down or suddenly leave the street and hit you on your Sunday afternoon walk. You cannot live without forming expectations with respect to contingent events and you have to neglect, more or less, the possibility of disappointment. You neglect this because it is a very rare possibility, but also because you do not know what else to do. The alternative is to live in a state of permanent uncertainty and to withdraw expectations without having anything with which to replace them.²⁸

Where trust is involved, in Luhmann's view, alternatives are consciously borne in mind by the individual in deciding to follow a particular course of action. Someone who buys a used car, instead of a new one, risks purchasing a dud. He or she places trust in the salesperson or the reputation of the firm to try to avoid this occurrence. Thus, an individual who does not consider alternatives is in a situation of confidence, whereas someone who does recognise those alternatives and tries to counter the risks thus acknowledged, engages in trust. In a situation of confidence, a person reacts to disappointment by blaming others; in circumstances of trust she or he must partly shoulder the blame and may regret having placed trust in someone or something. The distinction between trust and confidence depends upon whether the possibility of frustration is influenced by one's own previous behaviour and

hence upon a correlate discrimination between risk and danger. Because the notion of risk is relatively recent in origin, Luhmann holds, the possibility of separating risk and danger must derive from social characteristics of modernity. Essentially, it comes from a grasp of the fact that most of the contingencies which affect human activity are humanly created, rather than merely given by God or nature.

Luhmann's approach is important and directs our attention to a number of conceptual discriminations that have to be made in understanding trust. Yet I do not think we can be content with the details of his conceptualisation. He is surely right to distinguish between trust and confidence, and between risk and danger, as well as to say that all of these are in some way closely bound up with one another. But it is unhelpful to connect the notion of trust to the specific circumstances in which individuals consciously contemplate alternative courses of action. Trust is usually much more of a continuous state than this implies. It is, I shall suggest below, a particular type of confidence rather than something distinct from it. Similar observations apply to risk and danger. I do not agree with Luhmann's statement that "if you refrain from action you run no risk"²⁹—in other words, nothing ventured, nothing (potentially) lost. Inaction is often risky, and there are some risks which we all have to face whether we like it or not, such as the risks of ecological catastrophe or nuclear war. Moreover, there is no intrinsic connection between confidence and danger, even as Luhmann defines these. Danger exists in circumstances of risk and is actually relevant to defining what risk is—the risks involved in crossing the Atlantic in a small boat, for example, are considerably greater than making the journey in a large ocean

liner because of the variation in the element of danger involved.

I propose to conceptualise trust and its attendant notions differently. For ease of exposition, I shall set out the elements involved as a series of ten points which include a definition of trust but also develop a range of related observations.

1. Trust is related to absence in time and in space. There would be no need to trust anyone whose activities were continually visible and whose thought processes were transparent, or to trust any system whose workings were wholly known and understood. It has been said that trust is "a device for coping with the freedom of others,"³⁰ but the prime condition of requirements for trust is not lack of power but lack of full information.

2. Trust is basically bound up, not with risk, but with contingency. Trust always carries the connotation of reliability in the face of contingent outcomes, whether these concern the actions of individuals or the operation of systems. In the case of trust in human agents, the presumption of reliability involves the attribution of "probity" (honour) or love. This is why trust in persons is psychologically consequential for the individual who trusts: a moral hostage to fortune is given.

3. Trust is not the same as faith in the reliability of a person or system; it is what derives from that faith. Trust is precisely the link between faith and confidence, and it is this which distinguishes it from "weak inductive knowledge." The latter is confidence based upon some sort of mastery of the circumstances in which confidence is justified. *All* trust is in a certain sense blind trust!

4. We can speak of trust in symbolic tokens or expert systems, but this rests upon faith in the correctness of

principles of which one is ignorant, not upon faith in the “moral uprightness” (good intentions) of others. Of course, trust in persons is always to some degree relevant to faith in systems, but concerns their *proper* working rather than their operation as such.

5. At this point we reach a definition of trust. Trust may be defined as confidence in the reliability of a person or system, 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).

6. In conditions of modernity, trust exists in the context of (a) the general awareness that human activity—including within this phrase the impact of technology upon the material world—is socially created, rather than given in the nature of things or by divine influence; (b) the vastly increased transformative scope of human action, brought about by the dynamic character of modern social institutions. The concept of risk replaces that of *fortuna*, but this is not because agents in pre-modern times could not distinguish between risk and danger. Rather it represents an alteration in the perception of determination and contingency, such that human moral imperatives, natural causes, and chance reign in place of religious cosmologies. The idea of chance, in its modern senses, emerges at the same time as that of risk.

7. Danger and risk are closely related but are not the same. The difference does not depend upon whether or not an individual consciously weighs alternatives in contemplating or undertaking a particular course of action. What risk presumes is precisely danger (not necessarily awareness of danger). A person who risks something

courts danger, where danger is understood as a threat to desired outcomes. Anyone who takes a “calculated risk” is aware of the threat or threats which a specific course of action brings into play. But it is certainly possible to undertake actions or to be subject to situations which are inherently risky without the individuals involved being aware how risky they are. In other words, they are unaware of the dangers they run.

8. Risk and trust intertwine, trust normally serving to reduce or minimise the dangers to which particular types of activity are subject. There are some circumstances in which patterns of risk are institutionalised, within surrounding frameworks of trust (stock-market investment, physically dangerous sports). Here skill and chance are limiting factors upon risk, but normally risk is consciously calculated. In all trust settings, acceptable risk falls under the heading of “weak inductive knowledge,” and there is virtually always a balance between trust and the calculation of risk in this sense. What is seen as “acceptable” risk—the minimising of danger—varies in different contexts, but is usually central in sustaining trust. Thus traveling by air might seem an inherently dangerous activity, given that aircraft appear to defy the laws of gravity. Those concerned with running airlines counter this by demonstrating statistically how low the risks of air travel are, as measured by the number of deaths per passenger mile.

9. Risk is not just a matter of individual action. There are “environments of risk” that collectively affect large masses of individuals—in some instances, potentially everyone on the face of the earth, as in the case of the risk of ecological disaster or nuclear war. We may define “se-

curity” as a situation in which a specific set of dangers is counteracted or minimised. The experience of security usually rests upon a balance of trust and acceptable risk. In both its factual and its experiential sense, security may refer to large aggregates or collectivities of people—up to and including global security—or to individuals.

10. The foregoing observations say nothing about what constitutes the *opposite* of trust—which is *not*, I shall argue later, simply mistrust. Nor do these points offer much concerning the conditions under which trust is generated or dissolved; I shall discuss these in some detail in later sections.

The Reflexivity of Modernity

Inherent in the idea of modernity is a contrast with tradition. As noted previously, many combinations of the modern and the traditional are to be found in concrete social settings. Indeed, some authors have argued that these are so tightly interlaced as to make any generalised comparison valueless. But such is surely not the case, as we can see by pursuing an enquiry into the relation between modernity and reflexivity.

There is a fundamental sense in which reflexivity is a defining characteristic of all human action. All human beings routinely “keep in touch” with the grounds of what they do as an integral element of doing it. I have called this elsewhere the “reflexive monitoring of action,” using the phrase to draw attention to the chronic character of the processes involved.³¹ Human action does not incorporate chains of aggregate interactions and reasons, but a consistent—and, as Erving Goffman above all has

shown us, never-to-be-relaxed—monitoring of behaviour and its contexts. This is not the sense of reflexivity which is specifically connected with modernity, although it is the necessary basis of it.

In traditional cultures, the past is honoured and symbols are valued because they contain and perpetuate the experience of generations. Tradition is a mode of integrating the reflexive monitoring of action with the time-space organisation of the community. It is a means of handling time and space, which inserts any particular activity or experience within the continuity of past, present, and future, these in turn being structured by recurrent social practices. Tradition is not wholly static, because it has to be reinvented by each new generation as it takes over its cultural inheritance from those preceding it. Tradition does not so much resist change as pertain to a context in which there are few separated temporal and spatial markers in terms of which change can have any meaningful form.

In oral cultures, tradition is not known as such, even though these cultures are the most traditional of all. To understand tradition, as distinct from other modes of organising action and experience, demands cutting into time-space in ways which are only possible with the invention of writing. Writing expands the level of time-space distancing and creates a perspective of past, present, and future in which the reflexive appropriation of knowledge can be set off from designated tradition. However, in pre-modern civilisations reflexivity is still largely limited to the reinterpretation and clarification of tradition, such that in the scales of time the side of the “past” is much more heavily weighed down than that of

the "future." Moreover, since literacy is the monopoly of the few, the routinisation of daily life remains bound up with tradition in the old sense.

With the advent of modernity, reflexivity takes on a different character. It is introduced into the very basis of system reproduction, such that thought and action are constantly refracted back upon one another. The routinisation of daily life has no intrinsic connections with the past at all, save in so far as what "was done before" happens to coincide with what can be defended in a principled way in the light of incoming knowledge. To sanction a practice because it is traditional will not do; tradition can be justified, but only in the light of knowledge which is not itself authenticated by tradition. Combined with the inertia of habit, this means that, even in the most modernised of modern societies, tradition continues to play a role. But this role is generally much less significant than is supposed by authors who focus attention upon the integration of tradition and modernity in the contemporary world. For justified tradition is tradition in sham clothing and receives its identity only from the reflexivity of the modern.

The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character. We should be clear about the nature of this phenomenon. All forms of social life are partly constituted by actors' knowledge of them. Knowing "how to go on" in Wittgenstein's sense is intrinsic to the conventions which are drawn upon and reproduced by human activity. In all cultures, social practices are routinely altered in the light of ongoing discoveries which feed into them. But only in the

era of modernity is the revision of convention radicalised to apply (in principle) to all aspects of human life, including technological intervention into the material world. It is often said that modernity is marked by an appetite for the new, but this is not perhaps completely accurate. What is characteristic of modernity is not an embracing of the new for its own sake, but the presumption of wholesale reflexivity—which of course includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself.

Probably we are only now, in the late twentieth century, beginning to realise in a full sense how deeply unsettling this outlook is. For when the claims of reason replaced those of tradition, they appeared to offer a sense of certitude greater than that provided by preexisting dogma. But this idea only appears persuasive so long as we do not see that the reflexivity of modernity actually subverts reason, at any rate where reason is understood as the gaining of certain knowledge. Modernity is constituted in and through reflexively applied knowledge, but the equation of knowledge with certitude has turned out to be misconceived. We are abroad in a world which is thoroughly constituted through reflexively applied knowledge, but where at the same time we can never be sure that any given element of that knowledge will not be revised.

Even philosophers who most staunchly defend the claims of science to certitude, such as Karl Popper, acknowledge that, as he expresses it, "all science rests upon shifting sand."³² In science, *nothing* is certain, and nothing can be proved, even if scientific endeavour provides us with the most dependable information about the world to which we can aspire. In the heart of the world of hard science, modernity floats free.

No knowledge under conditions of modernity is knowledge in the "old" sense, where "to know" is to be certain. This applies equally to the natural and the social sciences. In the case of social science, however, there are further considerations involved. We should recall at this point the observations made earlier about the reflexive components of sociology.

In the social sciences, to the unsettled character of all empirically based knowledge we have to add the "subversion" which comes from the reentry of social scientific discourse into the contexts it analyses. The reflection of which the social sciences are the formalised version (a specific genre of expert knowledge) is quite fundamental to the reflexivity of modernity as a whole.

Because of the close relation between the Enlightenment and advocacy of the claims of reason, natural science has usually been taken as the preeminent endeavour distinguishing the modern outlook from what went before. Even those who favour interpretative rather than naturalistic sociology have normally seen social science as the poor relation of the natural sciences, particularly given the scale of technological development consequent upon scientific discoveries. But the social sciences are actually more deeply implicated in modernity than is natural science, since the chronic revision of social practices in the light of knowledge about those practices is part of the very tissue of modern institutions.³³

All the social sciences participate in this reflexive relation, although sociology has an especially central place. Take as an example the discourse of economics. Concepts like "capital," "investment," "markets," "industry," and many others, in their modern senses, were elaborated as part of the early development of economics as a distinct

discipline in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These concepts, and empirical conclusions linked to them, were formulated in order to analyse changes involved in the emergence of modern institutions. But they could not, and did not, remain separated from the activities and events to which they related. They have become integral to what "modern economic life" actually is and inseparable from it. Modern economic activity would not be as it is were it not for the fact that all members of the population have mastered these concepts and an indefinite variety of others.

The lay individual cannot necessarily provide formal definitions of terms like "capital" or "investment," but everyone who, say, uses a savings account in a bank demonstrates an implicit and practical mastery of those notions. Concepts such as these, and the theories and empirical information linked to them, are not merely handy devices whereby agents are somehow more clearly able to understand their behaviour than they could do otherwise. They actively constitute what that behaviour is and inform the reasons for which it is undertaken. There cannot be a clear insulation between literature available to economists and that which is either read or filters through in other ways to interested parties in the population: business leaders, government officials, and members of the public. The economic environment is constantly being altered in the light of these inputs, thus creating a situation of continual mutual involvement between economic discourse and the activities to which it refers.

The pivotal position of sociology in the reflexivity of modernity comes from its role as the most generalised type of reflection upon modern social life. Let us consider an example at the "hard edge" of naturalistic sociology.

The official statistics published by governments concerning, for instance, population, marriage and divorce, crime and delinquency, and so forth, seem to provide a means of studying social life with precision. To the pioneers of naturalistic sociology, such as Durkheim, these statistics represented hard data, in terms of which the relevant aspects of modern societies can be analysed more accurately than where such figures are lacking. Yet official statistics are not just analytical characteristics of social activity, but again enter constitutively into the social universe from which they are taken or counted up. From its inception, the collation of official statistics has been constitutive of state power and of many other modes of social organisation also. The co-ordinated administrative control achieved by modern governments is inseparable from the routine monitoring of "official data" in which all contemporary states engage.

The assembling of official statistics is itself a reflexive endeavour, permeated by the very findings of the social sciences that have utilised them. The practical work of coroners, for example, is the basis for the collection of suicide statistics. In the interpretation of causes/motives for death, however, coroners are guided by concepts and theories which purport to illuminate the nature of suicide. It would not be at all unusual to find a coroner who had read Durkheim.

Nor is the reflexivity of official statistics confined to the sphere of the state. Anyone in a Western country who embarks upon marriage today, for instance, knows that divorce rates are high (and may also, however imperfectly or partially, know a great deal more about the demography of marriage and the family). Knowledge of the high rate of divorce might affect the very decision to marry, as

well as decisions about related considerations—provisions about property and so forth. Awareness of levels of divorce, moreover, is normally much more than just consciousness of a brute fact. It is theorised by the lay agent in ways pervaded by sociological thinking. Thus virtually everyone contemplating marriage has some idea of how family institutions have been changing, changes in the relative social position and power of men and women, alterations in sexual mores, etc.—all of which enter into processes of further change which they reflexively inform. Marriage and the family would not be what they are today were they not thoroughly "sociologised" and "psychologised."

The discourse of sociology and the concepts, theories, and findings of the other social sciences continually "circulate in and out" of what it is that they are about. In so doing they reflexively restructure their subject matter, which itself has learned to think sociologically. *Modernity is itself deeply and intrinsically sociological*. Much that is problematic in the position of the professional sociologist, as the purveyor of expert knowledge about social life, derives from the fact that she or he is at most one step ahead of enlightened lay practitioners of the discipline.

Hence the thesis that more knowledge about social life (even if that knowledge is as well buttressed empirically as it could possibly be) equals greater control over our fate is false. It is (arguably) true about the physical world, but not about the universe of social events. Expanding our understanding of the social world might produce a progressively more illuminating grasp of human institutions and, hence, increasing "technological" control over them, if it were the case either that social life were entirely

separate from human knowledge about it or that knowledge could be filtered continuously into the reasons for social action, producing step-by-step increases in the "rationality" of behaviour in relation to specific needs.

Both conditions do in fact apply to many circumstances and contexts of social activity. But each falls well short of that totalising impact which the inheritance of Enlightenment thought holds out as a goal. This is so because of the influence of four sets of factors.

One—factually very important but logically the least interesting, or at any rate the least difficult to handle analytically—is differential power. The appropriation of knowledge does not happen in a homogeneous fashion, but is often differentially available to those in power positions, who are able to place it in the service of sectional interests.

A second influence concerns the role of values. Changes in value orders are not independent of innovations in cognitive orientation created by shifting perspectives on the social world. If new knowledge could be brought to bear upon a transcendental rational basis of values, this situation would not apply. But there is no such rational basis of values, and shifts in outlook deriving from inputs of knowledge have a mobile relation to changes in value orientations.

The third factor is the impact of unintended consequences. No amount of accumulated knowledge about social life could encompass all circumstances of its implementation, even if such knowledge were wholly distinct from the environment to which it applied. If our knowledge about the social world simply got better and better, the scope of unintended consequences might become more and more confined and unwanted conse-

quences rare. However, the reflexivity of modern social life blocks off this possibility and is itself the fourth influence involved. Although least discussed in relation to the limits of Enlightenment reason, it is certainly as significant as any of the others. The point is not that there is no stable social world to know, but that knowledge of that world contributes to its unstable or mutable character.

The reflexivity of modernity, which is directly involved with the continual generating of systematic self-knowledge, does not stabilise the relation between expert knowledge and knowledge applied in lay actions. Knowledge claimed by expert observers (in some part, and in many varying ways) rejoins its subject matter, thus (in principle, but also normally in practice) altering it. There is no parallel to this process in the natural sciences; it is not at all the same as where, in the field of microphysics, the intervention of an observer changes what is being studied.

Modernity or Post-Modernity?

At this point we can connect the discussion of reflexivity with the debates about post-modernity. "Post-modernity" is often used as if it were synonymous with post-modernism, post-industrial society, etc. Although the idea of post-industrial society, as worked out by Daniel Bell at any rate,³⁴ is well explicated, the other two concepts mentioned above certainly are not. I shall draw a distinction between them here. Post-modernism, if it means anything, is best kept to refer to styles or movements within literature, painting, the plastic arts, and architecture. It concerns aspects of *aesthetic reflection* upon the nature of modernity. Although sometimes only rather

vaguely designated, modernism is or was a distinguishable outlook in these various areas and might be said to have been displaced by other currents of a post-modernist variety. (A separate work could be written on this issue, which I shall not analyse here.)

Post-modernity refers to something different, at least as I shall define the notion. If we are moving into a phase of post-modernity, this means that the trajectory of social development is taking us away from the institutions of modernity towards a new and distinct type of social order. Post-modernism, if it exists in cogent form, might express an awareness of such a transition but does not show that it exists.

What does post-modernity ordinarily refer to? Apart from the general sense of living through a period of marked disparity from the past, the term usually means one or more of the following: that we have discovered that nothing can be known with any certainty, since all pre-existing "foundations" of epistemology have been shown to be unreliable; that "history" is devoid of teleology and consequently no version of "progress" can plausibly be defended; and that a new social and political agenda has come into being with the increasing prominence of ecological concerns and perhaps of new social movements generally. Scarcely anyone today seems to identify post-modernity with what it was once widely accepted to mean—the replacement of capitalism by socialism. Pushing this transition away from centre stage, in fact, is one of the main factors that has prompted current discussions about the possible dissolution of modernity, given Marx's totalising view of history.

Let us first of all dismiss as unworthy of serious intellectual consideration the idea that no systematic knowl-

edge of human action or trends of social development is possible. Were anyone to hold such a view (and if indeed it is not inchoate in the first place), they could scarcely write a book about it. The only possibility would be to repudiate intellectual activity altogether—even "playful deconstruction"—in favour, say, of healthy physical exercise. Whatever the absence of foundationalism in epistemology implies, it is not this. For a more plausible starting point, we might look to the "nihilism" of Nietzsche and Heidegger. In spite of the differences between the two philosophers, there is a view upon which they converge. Both link with modernity the idea that "history" can be identified as a progressive appropriation of rational foundations of knowledge. According to them, this is expressed in the notion of "overcoming": the formation of new understandings serves to identify what is of value, and what is not, in the cumulative stock of knowledge.³⁵ Each finds it necessary to distance himself from the foundational claims of the Enlightenment yet cannot criticise these from the vantage point of superior or better-founded claims. They therefore abandon the notion of "critical overcoming" so central to the Enlightenment critique of dogma.

Anyone who sees in this a basic transition from modernity to post-modernity, however, faces great difficulties. One of the main objections is obvious and well known. To speak of post-modernity as superseding modernity appears to invoke that very thing which is declared (now) to be impossible: giving some coherence to history and pinpointing our place in it. Moreover, if Nietzsche was the principal author disconnecting post-modernity from modernity, a phenomenon supposedly happening today, how is it possible that he saw all this

almost a century ago? Why was Nietzsche able to make such a breakthrough without, as he freely said, doing anything more than uncovering the hidden presuppositions of the Enlightenment itself?

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the break with foundationalism is a significant divide in philosophical thought, having its origins in the mid- to late nineteenth century. But it surely makes sense to see this as “modernity coming to understand itself” rather than the overcoming of modernity as such.³⁶ We can interpret this in terms of what I shall label *providential* outlooks. Enlightenment thought, and Western culture in general, emerged from a religious context which emphasised teleology and the achievement of God’s grace. Divine providence had long been a guiding idea of Christian thought. Without these preceding orientations, the Enlightenment would scarcely have been possible in the first place. It is in no way surprising that the advocacy of unfettered reason only reshaped the ideas of the providential, rather than displacing it. One type of certainty (divine law) was replaced by another (the certainty of our senses, of empirical observation), and divine providence was replaced by providential progress. Moreover, the providential idea of reason coincided with the rise of European dominance over the rest of the world. The growth of European power provided, as it were, the material support for the assumption that the new outlook on the world was founded on a firm base which both provided security and offered emancipation from the dogma of tradition.

Yet the seeds of nihilism were there in Enlightenment thought from the beginning. If the sphere of reason is wholly unfettered, no knowledge can rest upon an unquestioned foundation, because even the most firmly held

notions can only be regarded as valid “in principle” or “until further notice.” Otherwise they would relapse into dogma and become separate from the very sphere of reason which determines what validity is in the first place. Although most regarded the evidence of our senses as the most dependable information we can obtain, even the early Enlightenment thinkers were well aware that such “evidence” is always in principle suspect. Sense data could never provide a wholly secure base for knowledge claims. Given the greater awareness today that sensory observation is permeated by theoretical categories, philosophical thought has in the main veered quite sharply away from empiricism. Moreover, since Nietzsche we are much more clearly aware of the circularity of reason, as well as the problematic relations between knowledge and power.

Rather than these developments taking us “beyond modernity,” they provide a fuller understanding of the reflexivity inherent in modernity itself. Modernity is not only unsettling because of the circularity of reason, but because the nature of that circularity is ultimately puzzling. How can we justify a commitment to reason in the name of reason? Paradoxically, it was the logical positivists who stumbled across this issue most directly, as a result of the very lengths to which they went to strip away all residues of tradition and dogma from rational thought. Modernity turns out to be enigmatic at its core, and there seems no way in which this enigma can be “overcome.” We are left with questions where once there appeared to be answers, and I shall argue subsequently that it is not only philosophers who realise this. A general awareness of the phenomenon filters into anxieties which press in on everyone.

Post-modernity has been associated not only with the end of foundationalism but with the “end of history.” Since I have referred to it earlier, there is no need to provide a detailed discussion of this notion here. “History” has no intrinsic form and no overall teleology. A plurality of histories can be written, and they cannot be anchored by reference to an Archimedean point (such as the idea that history has an evolutionary direction). History must not be equated with “historicity,” since the second of these is distinctively bound up with the institutions of modernity. Marx’s historical materialism mistakenly identifies the one with the other and thereby not only attributes a false unity to historical development but also fails adequately to discern the special qualities of modernity. The points at issue here were well covered in the celebrated debate between Lévi-Strauss and Sartre.³⁷ The “use of history to make history” is substantially a phenomenon of modernity and not a generalised principle that can be applied to all eras—it is one version of modernity’s reflexivity. Even history as dating, the charting of sequences of changes between dates, is a specific way of coding temporality.

We must be careful how we understand historicity. It might be defined as the use of the past to help shape the present, but it does not depend upon respect for the past. On the contrary, historicity means the use of knowledge about the past as a means of breaking with it—or, at any rate, only sustaining what can be justified in a principled manner.³⁸ Historicity in fact orients us primarily towards the future. The future is regarded as essentially open, yet as counterfactually conditional upon courses of action undertaken with future possibilities in mind. This is a fundamental aspect of the time-space “stretch” which con-

ditions of modernity make both possible and necessary. “Futurology”—the charting of possible/likely/available futures—becomes more important than charting out the past. Each of the types of disembedding mechanism mentioned previously presumes a future orientation of this sort.

The break with providential views of history, the dissolution of foundationalism, together with the emergence of counterfactual future-oriented thought and the “emptying out” of progress by continuous change, are so different from the core perspectives of the Enlightenment as to warrant the view that far-reaching transitions have occurred. Yet referring to these as post-modernity is a mistake which hampers an accurate understanding of their nature and implications. The disjunctions which have taken place should rather be seen as resulting from the self-clarification of modern thought, as the remnants of tradition and providential outlooks are cleared away. We have not moved beyond modernity but are living precisely through a phase of its radicalisation.

The gradual decline in European or Western global hegemony, the other side of which is the increasing expansion of modern institutions worldwide, is plainly one of the main influences involved here. The projected “decline of the West,” of course, has been a preoccupation among some authors since the latter part of the nineteenth century. As used in such a context, the phrase usually referred to a cyclical conception of historical change, in which modern civilisation is simply seen as one regionally located civilisation among others which have preceded it in other areas of the world. Civilisations have their periods of youth, maturity, and old age, and as they are replaced by others, the regional distribution of global power alters. But modernity is *not* just one civilisation among others,

according to the discontinuist interpretation I have suggested above. The declining grip of the West over the rest of the world is not a result of the diminishing impact of the institutions which first arose there but, on the contrary, a result of their global spread. The economic, political, and military power which gave the West its primacy, and which was founded upon the conjunction of the four institutional dimensions of modernity I shall shortly discuss, no longer so distinctly differentiates the Western countries from others elsewhere. We can interpret this process as one of *globalisation*, a term which must have a key position in the lexicon of the social sciences.

What of the other sets of changes often linked, in some sense or another, to post-modernity: the rise of new social movements and the creation of novel political agendas? These are indeed important, as I shall try to show later. However, we have to sort our way circumspectly through the various theories or interpretations that have been advanced on the basis of them. I shall analyse post-modernity as a series of immanent transitions away from—or “beyond”—the various institutional clusters of modernity that will be distinguished subsequently. We do not yet live in a post-modern social universe, but we can still see more than a few glimpses of the emergence of ways of life and forms of social organisation which diverge from those fostered by modern institutions.

In terms of this analysis, it can easily be seen why the radicalising of modernity is so unsettling, and so significant. Its most conspicuous features—the *dissolution of evolutionism*, the *disappearance of historical teleology*, the recognition of *thoroughgoing, constitutive reflexivity*, together with the *evaporating of the privileged posi-*

tion of the West—move us into a new and disturbing universe of experience. If the “us” here still refers primarily to those living in the West itself—or, more accurately, the industrialised sectors of the world—it is something whose implications are felt everywhere.

Summary

We are now in a position to sum up the discussion thus far. Three dominant sources of the dynamism of modernity have been distinguished, each connected with the other:

The separation of time and space. This is the condition of time-space distancing of indefinite scope; it provides means of precise temporal and spatial zoning.

The development of disembedding mechanisms. These “lift out” social activity from localised contexts, reorganising social relations across large time-space distances.

The reflexive appropriation of knowledge. The production of systematic knowledge about social life becomes integral to system reproduction, rolling social life away from the fixities of tradition.

Taken together, these three features of modern institutions help to explain why living in the modern world is more like being aboard a careering juggernaut (an image I shall develop in more detail later) rather than being in a carefully controlled and well-driven motor car. The reflexive appropriation of knowledge, which is intrinsically energising but also necessarily unstable, extends to incorporate massive spans of time-space. The disembedding mechanisms provide the means of this extension by lifting social relations out of their “situatedness” in specific locales.

The disembedding mechanisms can be represented as follows:

Symbolic tokens and *expert systems* involve *trust*, as distinct from confidence based on weak inductive knowledge.

Trust operates in environments of risk, in which varying levels of security (protection against dangers) can be achieved.

The relation between trust and disembedding remains abstract here. We have to investigate later how trust, risk, security, and danger articulate in conditions of modernity. We also have to consider circumstances in which trust lapses and how situations of absence of trust might best be understood.

Knowledge (which should usually be understood here as "claims to knowledge") reflexively applied to social activity is filtered by four sets of factors:

Differential power. Some individuals or groups are more readily able to appropriate specialised knowledge than others.

The role of values. Values and empirical knowledge are connected in a network of mutual influence.

The impact of unintended consequences. Knowledge about social life transcends the intentions of those who apply it to transformative ends.

The circulating of social knowledge in the double hermeneutic. Knowledge reflexively applied to the conditions of system reproduction intrinsically alters the circumstances to which it originally referred.

Subsequently we shall trace out the implications of these features of reflexivity for the environments of trust and risk found in the contemporary social world.

II

The Institutional Dimensions of Modernity

Earlier I mentioned the tendency of most sociological perspectives or theories to look for a single dominant institutional nexus in modern societies: are modern institutions capitalistic, or are they industrial? This long-term debate is by no means devoid of significance today. Nonetheless, it is based in some part upon mistaken premises, since in each case a certain reductionism is involved—either industrialism is seen as a subtype of capitalism or vice versa. In contrast to such reductionism, we should see capitalism and industrialism as two distinct "organisational clusters" or dimensions involved in the institutions of modernity. I shall define them here as follows.

Capitalism is a system of commodity production, centred upon the relation between private ownership of capital and propertyless wage labour, this relation forming the main axis of a class system. Capitalist enterprise depends upon production for competitive markets, prices being signals for investors, producers, and consumers alike.

The chief characteristic of *industrialism* is the use of