

# Modernity and Social Change: Perversion, Commoditization and Closure

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## Introduction

Man believes in modernity and technology because he fears death. Man is likely to cling on to anything that will give him comfort, gratification or security in the world; a world in which culture and ritual play distinct and critical functions for human survival. Modernity for man used to be about understanding how the customization of societies and how things ought to come into play. But modernity is the realization of the question of what it means to be alive today? Modernity moves man towards resolution and closure within artificial landscapes designed out of contradictions and consequences. There are clear ambiguities, contradictions and consequences throughout the modern experience. This is discoverable in reality as well as the non-reality of academia, of cultural anthropology, political theory, political science, and computer science.<sup>1</sup>

In 16<sup>th</sup> century Siam, the King of Ayutthaya held Court where no one was allowed to look directly at him or gaze upon his visage unless they desired for themselves the sharp edge of the executioner's axe. The king's word was final and he could kill or enrich anyone, local or foreigner on a whim. In the tradition of the Sun King, Louis XIV (Roi de France et de Navarre), many peasants were massacred and hung for various crimes against the state. Louis said, *l'état, c'est moi*, I am the State. This large claim meant that he was both the law maker, judge and the executor of the law. Louis introduced the Civil Procedure Code (1667) and the Criminal Procedure Code (1669) as well as various institutions that would glorify himself or his family members such as the Paris Observatory (1667) and the French Academy (1671). Despite having initiated wars against the Spanish and the Dutch, Louis became even more powerful although eventually his over confidence and self-aggrandizing style would put his entire project into decline at that infamous point known as the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14) [1-4] Louis XIV's reign went into decline because he attempted to unify his empire under a single religion. But at least he was not decapitated. However, he and his successors laid the groundwork for the French Revolution. Ironically, it was a medical doctor who popularised the use of guillotine technology to behead criminals. The French leaders at that time believed that beheading was more humane because it was more humane than beheading with an axe, drawn and quartered, the wheel of torture, burnt at the stake, or hanged to death. That was their notion of justice for people from all walks of life. In 1794 just over a century after the Bourbon rule of Louis XIV, over 1200 people were efficiently guillotined. During the French Revolution, it was considered normal for the people to gather to watch the spectacle of King Louis XVI and other French royals as well as Robespierre being guillotined. The beheading of the French aristocracy in 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris was a matter that was less about the rise of democracy. It marked the turning point of a modernity driven by efficiency and the effective killing of large numbers

<sup>1</sup>One should not consider mass communication, media studies and communication studies as actual academic disciplines but multi-disciplinary approaches to how man talks to one another. See for example, Timothy Oakes, 1997. *Place and the Paradox of Modernity* Annals of the Association of American Geographers 87, 3: 509-531; Louisa Schein, 1999. *Performing Modernity* Cultural Anthropology 14, 3: 361-395; Antonio L. Rappa, 2000. *Surviving the Politics of Late Modernity: The Eurasian Fringe Community of Singapore* Asian Journal of Social Science 28, 2: 153-180; and Roy A. Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People*, 2nd Edition, Waveland Press, 1984.

of people. Their deaths demonstrated the nature of the Europeans after millennia of civilization. Foucault is widely cited as having condemned their actions in his careful accounts of French cultural history. This is illustrated in his *Discipline and Punish (Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la Prison)* (1975). Foucault spoke of the perversion of mankind and the gratification derived from watching the spectacle of another human being tortured and massacred in public.

Interestingly, when we compare 16<sup>th</sup> century Siam to 18<sup>th</sup> century France, we discover no really distinctive contrast between those two far-flung societies. This is because the human condition – whether in Ayutthaya or Paris – has a remarkable and immoral desire to see other human beings tortured and killed almost like a spectator sport. This is why modern Canadian ice-hockey games and English soccer-fan hooliganism are independently intriguing. Surely the attraction exists for the skills of the players and teams but there is also a secret desire for aggression, belligerence, revenge, bloodshed and death [5-8]. In a sense, the modern sports' fan seeks violence surreptitiously through an identification process that feeds into the modern sports culture for bloody human contact. One thing is for sure, this search for realistic identification is nowhere an extension of the imaginative mind, but an actual desire for political violence for behaving in socially acceptable ways most of the time as Canadians are widely known for as Michael Moore noted in his work on Bowling for Columbine, there are in fact more weapons per capita of Canadian citizens but significantly less crime than in the US.<sup>2</sup> The ideal sport is one which allows for the "transgression of cultural boundaries King [6] if only to make sense out of man's deeply-held penchant for violating one another. In one sense, it can be explained as folklore Robidoux [7] but in another it is no less than our proclivity for extracting brutality and cruelty out of inhumanity's deepest psychological depths. Humanity's greed for violence has incredible and astonishing resilience. The global pressures to conform our local norms to "international values" in the globalized world are immense; these pressures arise from powerful marketing machinery, mass consumption, conspicuous consumption and social media technologies of social depravity and sickness.

<sup>2</sup>See for example, Diane V. White, 1986. *Sports Violence as Criminal Assault: Development of the Doctrine by Canadian Courts* Duke Law Journal 1986, 6: 1030-1054; Anthony King, 1997. *The Postmodernity of Football Hooliganism* British Journal of Sociology 48, 4: 576-593; Michael A. Robidoux, 2002. *Imagining a Canadian Identity through Sport: A Historical Interpretation of Lacrosse and Hockey* Journal of American Folklore 115, 456: 209-225; and Gordon W. Russell, 2008. *Aggression in the Sports World: A Social Psychological Perspective*. Oxford University Press.

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## The Modern Structure of Society's Sicknesses

This paper examines the social interaction of individuals within the larger macroeconomic structure of society and how our communities are unable to achieve or attain resolution or closure without regard to ethical impropriety because of the modernist penchant for perversity and commoditization. People today are willing to break the law and their own moral compass to do one better than the other.

This 'larger, macroeconomic structure of society' is part of the global experience of what it means to be alive today, which is what we refer to as modernity [9-13]. Hans Blumenberg's [9] work that was first published in 1960 reveals the archival work for the *Begriffsgeschichte*. Blumenberg's idea of modernity is a set of patterns, a series of straight tension lines, metaphorical extensions that are added to each extension hence regenerating new metaphorical offshoots such as the Cartesian *Discours de la method* that Blumenberg [9] refers to in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. The structures of societies' sicknesses and moral depravities are not about perspectivism or choosing to focus on a particularly sad part of human history. Rather, these structures of sickness are pivotal to the so-called creative joints and aspirations of what pivot the tyrannical joints of the majority as opposed to Scott's much later retort in this *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). For every wealthy person and millionaire in Paris today, there are at least 2.5 million living under inhumane conditions; every sixth person in Bangkok lives under the poverty line while His Majesty the King remains in 2015 the richest man on earth.

These warning signs of relative deprivation and the widening gap between the richest rich and the poorest poor date back to at least the time of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Comte, Sartre, De Beauvoir, Arendt, Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Foucault, Kariel, Habermas, Derrida, and Rorty. On the other hand, the little known Wendy Brown's view of late modernity comes much closer and clearer when it does to understanding the cultural violence and injurious beings that Foucault envisaged and captured in his cultural history. In her 1985 book *States of Injury*, Brown discusses the nature of how feminist freedom and power are intrinsically tied to each other and hence drives humanity forward without seeking recompense or allowing for post-alternative instruments to take effect in the late modern age.<sup>3</sup> When the absolutist, slave-owning Siamese king decided to travel from one palace to the next, it was reported that it would take ten months of planning, hundreds of slaves, many royal elephants, a hundred horses, many nobles, courtiers, minor royals, the major royals, the Front Palace guards, the Queen's Guard and the primary entourage with sufficient food that would have otherwise fed 500 muban and all their villagers. From one end to the next, the entire procession would take three to six days to pass a single rural village.<sup>4</sup>

A hundred years later when the Siamese capital had long moved from Ayutthaya to Rattanakosin in Bangkok and Rama X was on the throne, a typical entourage would take less than 15 minutes to pass a rural village in high-speed Western motorcars. The more powerful the general, the larger the number of motorcars, and later, airplanes and helicopters that he possessed as critiqued in Chaloehtiarana's [14] excellent *The Politics of Despotism* (2007) and the earlier work by Tanabe and Keyes [15] *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos* (2002). In both texts we see the compression of modern social space due to the forces of

economic pressure, threat of war, internal security, national identity and that penchant for fostering state projects in lieu of individual liberties.<sup>5</sup> When there is compression of culture, there is also compression of time and space [11].

Connolly's own work however hardly makes direct reference to Foucault's conceptualization of political violence and in fact has moved away from the large span of that Frenchman's theoretical influence. In on *A World of Becoming* [16] we read Connolly's most optimistic views of late modernity, which illustrate the creative genius of our in-built mechanisms for ensuring modernist success that exceed human expectations. These are discernible from differentiating the temporal registers that resonate to evoke political, social and economic change. Connolly refers to his usual favorites: Merleau-Ponty, Whitehead, Deleuze, Kauffman and Keller.<sup>6</sup> What Connolly does not reveal is the fact that the creative abilities that some of us possess are implemented at the material expense of many others. Like the Siamese kings, Russian Czars, English rulers and French monarchs one man's meat is always another man's empty plate. This adjudicated leitmotif represents a kind of social recurrence that is associated with given person, place or idea in time. So we turn to philosophy again to provide answers that we instinctively feel cannot be found.

But when we consider the contemporary philosophers, we cannot ignore their role in society, the role of the intellectual that is, as well as their ethical modes of political participation within an increasingly unpredictable *weltanschauung* or worldview as the French (but not Foucault) seem to prefer to advertise *le monde n'est pas suffisant* space as a kind of badge of honor. Yet it is true that time and the world will never be sufficiently large or sufficient for man. As we have seen, Blumenberg's implication in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* is that modern legitimacy is built on the illegitimacy of age-old traditions and customs. The ethics should not change with social development since the human condition is basically unadulterated and sustains a consistency of immoral toleration for horror. The modern reader would have thus already have identified – along with Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic* (1963) that the creation of the scientific case as a building block for knowledge that ironically dehumanizes the patient while emphasizing the science. Yet each of the philosophical categories above strives to be decidedly different in their perspectives on the idea of self-worth and closure in the search for the truth. The naked ape apparently is nothing but another modernist non sequitur with nothing more than rave conclusions to aimless ends.

And there still remain fundamental distinctions among these contemporary philosophers. Blumenberg represents the old European school, a line of thought that is bent on writing in an obverse, dense and metaphorically complex manner. The integration of our understanding of the rapid social changes in globalization, the social axial that we understand as the modern penchant for self-aggrandization, vain-glory (Hobbes' *Leviathan*, 1641) and the celebration of life through unethical means. If Hobbes was to be believed to be the first true modern political scientist, then Samuel P. Huntington must be surely be thought to be the earnestly fake one. Huntington's "clash of civilization" privileges

<sup>5</sup>Thak Chaloehtiarana, 2007. *The Politics of Despotism*. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications; and Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles Keyes, 2002 *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*. New York and London: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup>Hans Blumenberg, 1983. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (MIT Press); Wendy Brown, 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton University Press); William E. Connolly, 2010. *A World of Becoming* (Duke University Press); Hans Blumenberg, 2010. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (Cornell University Press).

<sup>3</sup>Antonio L. Rappa, 2003 *A Critique of Modernity: On Positivism, and Phenomenology Alternatives* 2, 3-4 online.

<sup>4</sup>Antonio L. Rappa, 2016 (forthcoming) *The Village* (World Scientific).

upper, wealthier classes in the neoliberal capitalist world order and disempower men of color, women (and minorities such as gays, lesbians, transgendered persons and bisexual ones for example). Francis Fukuyama was with even more incoherent with his unsophisticated and ingenuous bluff that he used in the End of History argument; an argument he bald-facedly re-worked from the fin de siècle, turn of the century writers. The world spins uncontrollably between the two poles of modernity: Huntington's empirical falsity and Fukuyama's theoretical regurgitation.

In order for us to completely realize our sense of a common human destiny, we need to engage in ethical ways the ideas and actions that emerge from our social interaction. How have our favorite contemporary philosophers aided our quest for understanding the modern experience – what it means to be alive today? It appears that Connolly is an island unto himself where only a few specially chosen ones – those sufficiently contrite after having prayed to St Augustine – are permitted to inhabit. Brown reminds us of the complex intellectual articulations of feminist scholarship as well as political theory but has given it up for something else. Blumenberg's work is by far the most fashionable despite being outdated (sic). The enlightening dimension of Blumenberg remains in that his ability to make sense out of nonsense in society. We therefore should immediately understand that Blumenberg's *Work on Myth* (1985), and *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (1987) is vital examinations of secularity and theology through *Umbesetzung*. The answers to theological questions (running an interesting parallel to Connolly's [11] work) that engages and enrages Catherine Keller's theological perspectives on secularism and religion) achieves this through relatively authentic premises that lead to not un-plausible outcomes. For example, modernity's exigencies are not merely exasperations of closer or event but – if we are to believe Deleuze and Guattari's vision of philosophy that reconstitute the modern age through *Selbstbehauptung* and the *geist* within Blumenberg's *Anknüpfung* or in Paul Bernays [17] *Zur frage der Anknüpfung an die kantische erkenntnistheorie* or his extension of the subsequent interrogative in Kant.<sup>7</sup>

When we leave these philosophical representations of complex modernity (and their most convoluted interpretations aside) we can make space for simple understandings of modernity such as Charles Taylor's [18] who said that modernity is about moving from one constellation of understanding to another.

Our own notion of modernity must really answer the question of 'what does it mean to be alive today?' Without a sense of presence and knowing, our entire cosmos of understanding and the depth of research that history has bequeathed to us make for naught, nothingness and Nietzsche [12] as explained in *Modernity and Consumption*.<sup>8</sup> Taylor's use of 'background understandings' and repositioning of perception – his prescriptive perspectivism – such as the growth of reason, the development of modern discursive practices and the megalomaniacal inventions in engineering science (that modernist religion) dwarf the human consciousness as it stymies the human mind. Therefore Taylor's famous notion of aculturalism does not really apply. This is also because Taylor thinks that acculturation adds color and meaning but in effect causes distortions of political reality.<sup>9</sup> He argues on page 25 of his 1995 article that Nietzsche explains modern scientific culture through a

constellation of values; but I think that his use of the word constellation too vivid, too wide and too heavenly to make sense for the concept to be grounded in reality. For example, if we were to re-write modernity and consumption (which we won't) we would explain modernity by way of a contemporary example. Think about the way in which the social construction of how dieting, weight loss, identity change, plastic surgery, and nanotechnology have changed our lives dramatically since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a span of less than three generations it is now possible to travel further, faster and more comfortably than it has been at any other point in time in history. And our *Zeitschrift of values* – perfection, idealism, indecency, revenge, rage, jealousy, commitment and engendered mass consumer market for bodycon, for connecting the body and the mind with the spirit and the unconscionable. Heese [19] illustrated this very adequately in "*Anknüpfung und Loslösung. Menzel und das Berliner Kupferstichkabinett*", society as a museum, a spectacle that is capable of dislocating itself, changing its position, attaching and detaching the self, our individual bodies, within social constructions of political reality as some have seen previously.<sup>10</sup>

## Modernity and Perversion

To pervert the course of justice is to bend justice in ways that it was not designed. However, man's desire for perverting civilization is anchored in modernity and articulated by technology. If one moves towards an understanding of social perversion as a modern ill with motivations present in individuals and in social behavior, then one discovers our experience to be no less than an approximation of Charles Taylor's [18] model of the multicultural society.<sup>11</sup> He sickeningly suggests and indirectly that societies have access to rich moral resources in his *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, 1989). This is itself a perversion of reality and failure to admit that human beings are far more immoral and illiberal than most would admit.

All across the world for example, many suffer the consequences of embracing modernity's perversions<sup>12</sup> as resoundingly demonstrated in Mary Beth Mills' excellent work on women in Thailand (for example) in the *American Ethnologist* as well as the doctoral dissertation of Yodmanee Tepanon on "Exploring the Minds of Sex Tourists: The Psychological Motivation of Liminal People". The shape of these consumption patterns make for a greater emphasis on the commoditization of women's bodies in late modernity.<sup>13</sup> From the series of examples above, we notice several critical concepts in modernity's harmful wake: the body, attire, norms, attitudes, religion, social construction, and technology. We saw from the constellation of values and events above that perversions of justice as fairness fail to work consistently because of the problems of the strong over the weak, and the pressures within and without society to conform. Such manifestations of public, legal and nominal perversions in society around the globe eventually erupt into collective political protests, articulations and challenges to the authoritarian structures that silently

<sup>7</sup>Paul Bernays 1955. *Zur frage der Anknüpfung an die kantische erkenntnistheorie. Dialectica* 9,1-2: 23-65.

<sup>8</sup>Antonio L. Rappa, 2002. *Modernity and Consumption* (World Scientific).

<sup>9</sup>Charles Taylor, 1995. *Two Theories of Modernity* Hastings Center Report 25, 2: 24-33.

<sup>10</sup>Andreas Heese, 1997. *Anknüpfung und Loslösung. Menzel und das Berliner Kupferstichkabinett Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 41: 79- 89.

<sup>11</sup>Antonio Rappa and Sor-Hoon Tan 2003 *Political implications of Confucian Familism Asian Philosophy* 13 (2 and 3): 87-102.

<sup>12</sup>See also Fazlur Rahman 1966, *Modernity's Impact on Islam Islamic Studies* 5, 2: 113-128 and Alev Çinar 2005. *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey: Bodies, Places, and Time* (Minnesota University Press).

<sup>13</sup>Mary Beth Mills, 1997. *Contesting the Margins of Modernity: Women, Migration, and Consumption in Thailand* *American Ethnologist* 24, 1: 37-61; Yodmanee Tepanon *Exploring the Minds of Sex Tourists: The Psychological Motivation of Liminal People* submitted as a doctoral dissertation in *Hospitality and Tourism Studies*, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 2006; and, Mary Beth Mills, 2005. *From Nimble Fingers to Raised Fists: Women and Labor Activism in Globalizing Thailand* *Signs* 31, 1: 117-144.

enforce such perversities. Dysfunctional modernity characterizes the structure of modern compromises. And we compromise on everything in modernity, from ethics and principles, to public office and personal promises. Modernity's perversions are used as means to vent psychological abuse and impairment at birth or in childhood from adults and the cloistered environment. But modernity's contradictions are equally pervasive in terms of creating solutions to problems that are inherently problematic and ironically need more solutions. So problems in modernity create more problems and there is no end to its beginning again whether they be hate crime, police brutality, unlawful detention, abuse of the legal system or political corruption. In attempting to transcend modernity but remained tied to its undergrowth, its subliminal norms and neoliberal marketing schemes. This tells us much about our failures, for example, as Taylor correctly assesses the value of our propensity 'to split fact from value' or the tendency to give up religion.<sup>14</sup>

### The Sign at the End of the Road

In conclusion, there should be none whatsoever that becomes so beholden to his or her society that she or he forgets the fact that ethics is a good servant but a poor master. We should not place social reality before theory, not the cart before the horse. Profound as he was as a scholar, let us not make the same mistake made by Heinrich von Kleist and his utter misconception of modernity: inconclusive because modernity is a series of trials that are coherently – though not always cogently – tied together by cosmetics, plastics that adhere because they are flexible and tractable. This is also being achieved in the trading of human flesh and the commoditization of women's and men's bodies in the immoral underground economy that goes without resolution. Ernesto Laclau [20] suggested in 1989 that the resolution and closure associated with the grand narrative was always fascism in disguise, an unbendable need and desire to maintain a salubrious architectonics of control, of self-empowerment and verve.<sup>15</sup> The modern social compact is devoid of ethics and moral beings. There is a certain degree of vain pessimism about humanity that deviates from the right path and towards the bramble bush. Resolution is what warring parties seek to achieve when both have had their resources depleted from contestation. Closure is what we wish to ideally achieve within the modern age because closure allows modern woman and modern man to move forward and to forget the past. It is unlikely for most of us to be able to forget our individual interests and our selves in order to help benefit society. Society above the self is not an ideal platform to look into Nietzsche's abyss, lest it look back into us, into our souls. Modernity is largely about how we can avoid the traditions that tie us to a forgotten and useless past. Bearing in mind that anything that we do in modernity calls and cries out for the avoidance of a landscape made up of contradictions and consequences.

We have seen in this paper how the social interaction of individuals within the larger macroeconomic structure of society when perceived through the three broad categories of philosophers [9-13] have yielded

a different kind of becoming, a retinue of hope over hopelessness, and a marked philharmonic for taking the correct measures when we do resection to gain our bearings without losing our moral compass.

In the end, the vital compunction within human beings, within the human condition is to seek a greater resolution and closure from within society rather than within ourselves.

It is only through such discipline that the ethics with which we have used to guide our decisions will result in a clearer and more meaningful life within the liting fantasy of the neoliberal capitalist structures that our markets, music and methods are likely to inhabit for the rest of our lives.<sup>16</sup> The magnitude of violence that continues to precipitate into a vacuous modernity that would make Connolly cringe, Foucault flinch and Habermas hide in horror.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Taylor, *ibid*.

<sup>15</sup>Ernesto Laclau, 1989. Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism Politics and the Limits of Modernity *Social Text* 21: 63-82.

<sup>16</sup>Amporn Jirattikorn, 2006. Lukthung: Authenticity and Modernity in Thai Country Music *Asian Music* 37,1: 24-50.

<sup>17</sup>See for example, Antonio L Rappa, 2013. Urban Terrorism and Political Violence in Southern Thailand: The Case of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat" *Journal of African and Asian Local Government Studies* 2,2: 128-142; and Antonio L Rappa, 2015. "Democracy and Village Politics in Thailand and Singapore: Making Analytical Comparisons in Late Modernity" *Journal of Political Science and Public Affairs* 3: 159.