

The Consequences
of Modernity
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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

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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-

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

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

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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 distanciation. 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 distanciation 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 distanciation.