

Preface

For most of my life, since I learned that I was living in "a modern building" and growing up as part of "a modern family," in the Bronx of thirty years ago, I have been fascinated by the meanings of modernity. In this book I have tried to open up some of these dimensions of meaning, to explore and chart the adventures and horrors, the ambiguities and ironies of modern life. The book moves and develops through a number of ways of reading: of texts—Goethe's *Faust*, the *Communist Manifesto*, *Notes from Underground*, and many more; but also I try to read spatial and social environments—small towns, big construction sites, dams and power plants, Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, Haussmann's Parisian boulevards, Petersburg prospects, Robert Moses' highways through New York; and finally, reading fictional and actual people's lives, from Goethe's time through Marx's and Baudelaire's and into our own. I have tried to show how all these people share, and all these books and environments express, certain distinctively modern concerns. They are moved at once by a will to change—to transform both themselves and their world—and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart. They all know the thrill and the dread of a world in which "all that is solid melts into air."

To be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction. It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own. It is to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibil-

ities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths to which so many modern adventures lead, longing to create and to hold on to something real even as everything melts. We might even say that to be fully modern is to be anti-modern: from Marx's and Dostoevsky's time to our own, it has been impossible to grasp and embrace the modern world's potentialities without loathing and fighting against some of its most palpable realities. No wonder then that, as the great modernist and anti-modernist Kierkegaard said, the deepest modern seriousness must express itself through irony. Modern irony animates so many great works of art and thought over the past century; at the same time, it infuses millions of ordinary people's everyday lives. This book aims to bring these works and these lives together, to restore the spiritual wealth of modernist culture to the modern man and woman in the street, to show how, for all of us, modernism is realism. This will not resolve the contradictions that pervade modern life; but it should help us to understand them, so that we can be clear and honest in facing and sorting out and working through the forces that make us what we are.

Shortly after I finished this book, my dear son Marc, five years old, was taken from me. I dedicate *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* to him. His life and death bring so many of its ideas and themes close to home: the idea that those who are most happily at home in the modern world, as he was, may be most vulnerable to the demons that haunt it; the idea that the daily routine of playgrounds and bicycles, of shopping and eating and cleaning up, of ordinary hugs and kisses, may be not only infinitely joyous and beautiful but also infinitely precarious and fragile; that it may take desperate and heroic struggles to sustain this life, and sometimes we lose. Ivan Karamazov says that, more than anything else, the death of children makes him want to give back his ticket to the universe. But he does not give it back. He keeps on fighting and loving; he keeps on keeping on.

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Introduction

Modernity—Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

THERE IS a mode of vital experience—experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils—that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience "modernity." To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air."

People who find themselves in the midst of this maelstrom are apt to feel that they are the first ones, and maybe the only ones, to be going through it; this feeling has engendered numerous nostalgic myths of pre-modern Paradise Lost. In fact, however, great and ever-increasing numbers of people have been going through

it for close to five hundred years. Although most of these people have probably experienced modernity as a radical threat to all their history and traditions, it has, in the course of five centuries, developed a rich history and a plenitude of traditions of its own. I want to explore and chart these traditions, to understand the ways in which they can nourish and enrich our own modernity, and the ways in which they may obscure or impoverish our sense of what modernity is and what it can be.

The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurtling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along, an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market. In the twentieth century, the social processes that bring this maelstrom into being, and keep it in a state of perpetual becoming, have come to be called "modernization." These world-historical processes have nourished an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own. Over the past century, these visions and values have come to be loosely grouped together under the name of "modernism." This book is a study in the dialectics of modernization and modernism.

In the hope of getting a grip on something as vast as the history of modernity, I have divided it into three phases. In the first phase, which goes roughly from the start of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, people are just beginning to experience

modern life; they hardly know what has hit them. They grope, desperately but half blindly, for an adequate vocabulary; they have little or no sense of a modern public or community within which their trials and hopes can be shared. Our second phase begins with the great revolutionary wave of the 1790s. With the French Revolution and its reverberations, a great modern public abruptly and dramatically comes to life. This public shares the feeling of living in a revolutionary age, an age that generates explosive upheavals in every dimension of personal, social and political life. At the same time, the nineteenth-century modern public can remember what it is like to live, materially and spiritually, in worlds that are not modern at all. From this inner dichotomy, this sense of living in two worlds simultaneously, the ideas of modernization and modernism emerge and unfold. In the twentieth century, our third and final phase, the process of modernization expands to take in virtually the whole world, and the developing world culture of modernism achieves spectacular triumphs in art and thought. On the other hand, as the modern public expands, it shatters into a multitude of fragments, speaking incommensurable private languages; the idea of modernity, conceived in numerous fragmentary ways, loses much of its vividness, resonance and depth, and loses its capacity to organize and give meaning to people's lives. As a result of all this, we find ourselves today in the midst of a modern age that has lost touch with the roots of its own modernity.

If there is one archetypal modern voice in the early phase of modernity, before the American and French revolutions, it is the voice of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau is the first to use the word *moderniste* in the ways in which the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will use it; and he is the source of some of our most vital modern traditions, from nostalgic reverie to psychoanalytic self-scrutiny to participatory democracy. Rousseau was, as everyone knows, a deeply troubled man. Much of his anguish springs from sources peculiar to his own strained life; but some of it derives from his acute responsiveness to social conditions that were coming to shape millions of people's lives. Rousseau astounded his contemporaries by proclaiming that European society was "at the edge of the abyss," on the verge of the most explosive revolutionary upheavals. He experienced everyday life in that society—especially in Paris, its capital—as a whirlwind, *le tourbillon social*.¹ How was the self to move and live in the whirlwind?

In Rousseau's romantic novel *The New Eloise*, his young hero, Saint-Preux, makes an exploratory move—an archetypal move for millions of young people in the centuries to come—from the country to the city. He writes to his love, Julie, from the depths of *le tourbillon social*, and tries to convey his wonder and dread. Saint-Preux experiences metropolitan life as “a perpetual clash of groups and cabals, a continual flux and reflux of prejudices and conflicting opinions . . . Everyone constantly places himself in contradiction with himself,” and “everything is absurd, but nothing is shocking, because everyone is accustomed to everything.” This is a world in which “the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, truth, virtue, have only a local and limited existence.” A multitude of new experiences offer themselves; but anyone who wants to enjoy them “must be more pliable than Alcibiades, ready to change his principles with his audience, to adjust his spirit with every step.” After a few months in this environment,

I'm beginning to feel the drunkenness that this agitated, tumultuous life plunges you into. With such a multitude of objects passing before my eyes, I'm getting dizzy. Of all the things that strike me, there is none that holds my heart, yet all of them together disturb my feelings, so that I forget what I am and who I belong to.

He reaffirms his commitment to his first love; yet even as he says it, he fears that “I don't know one day what I'm going to love the next.” He longs desperately for something solid to cling to, yet “I see only phantoms that strike my eye, but disappear as soon as I try to grasp them.”² This atmosphere—of agitation and turbulence, psychic dizziness and drunkenness, expansion of experiential possibilities and destruction of moral boundaries and personal bonds, self-enlargement and self-derangement, phantoms in the street and in the soul—is the atmosphere in which modern sensibility is born.

If we move forward a hundred years or so and try to identify the distinctive rhythms and timbres of nineteenth-century modernity, the first thing we will notice is the highly developed, differentiated and dynamic new landscape in which modern experience takes place. This is a landscape of steam engines, automatic factories, railroads, vast new industrial zones; of teeming cities that have grown overnight, often with dreadful human con-

sequences; of daily newspapers, telegraphs, telephones and other mass media, communicating on an ever wider scale; of increasingly strong national states and multinational aggregations of capital; of mass social movements fighting these modernizations from above with their own modes of modernization from below; of an ever-expanding world market embracing all, capable of the most spectacular growth, capable of appalling waste and devastation, capable of everything except solidity and stability. The great modernists of the nineteenth century all attack this environment passionately, and strive to tear it down or explode it from within; yet all find themselves remarkably at home in it, alive to its possibilities, affirmative even in their radical negations, playful and ironic even in their moments of gravest seriousness and depth.

We can get a feeling for the complexity and richness of nineteenth-century modernism, and for the unities that infuse its diversity, if we listen briefly to two of its most distinctive voices: Nietzsche, who is generally perceived as a primary source of many of the modernisms of our time, and Marx, who is not ordinarily associated with any sort of modernism at all.

Here is Marx, speaking in awkward but powerful English in London in 1856.³ "The so-called revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents," he begins, "small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society. But they denounced the abyss. Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock." The ruling classes of the reactionary 1850s tell the world that all is solid again; but it is not clear if even they themselves believe it. In fact, Marx says, "the atmosphere in which we live weighs upon everyone with a 20,000-pound force, but do you feel it?" One of Marx's most urgent aims is to make people "feel it"; this is why his ideas are expressed in such intense and extravagant images—abysses, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, crushing gravitational force—images that will continue to resonate in our own century's modernist art and thought. Marx goes on: "There is one great fact, characteristic of this our nineteenth century, a fact which no party dares deny." The basic fact of modern life, as Marx experiences it, is that this life is radically contradictory at its base:

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces which no epoch of human history had ever sus-

pected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labor, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and stultifying human life into a material force.

These miseries and mysteries fill many moderns with despair. Some would "get rid of modern arts, in order to get rid of modern conflicts"; others will try to balance progress in industry with a neofeudal or neoabsolutist regression in politics. Marx, however, proclaims a paradigmatically modernist faith: "On our part, we do not mistake the shrewd spirit that continues to mark all these contradictions. We know that to work well . . . the new-fangled forces of society want only to be mastered by new-fangled men—and such are the working men. They are as much the invention of modern time as machinery itself." Thus a class of "new men," men who are thoroughly modern, will be able to resolve the contradictions of modernity, to overcome the crushing pressures, earthquakes, weird spells, personal and social abysses, in whose midst all modern men and women are forced to live. Having said this, Marx turns abruptly playful and connects his vision of the future with the past—with English folklore, with Shakespeare: "In the signs that bewilder the middle class, the aristocracy and the poor prophets of regression, we recognize our brave friend Robin Goodfellow, the old mole that can work in the earth so fast, that worthy pioneer—the Revolution."

Marx's writing is famous for its endings. But if we see him as a modernist, we will notice the dialectical motion that underlies and animates his thought, a motion that is open-ended, and that flows against the current of his own concepts and desires. Thus, in the *Communist Manifesto*, we see that the revolutionary dynamism that will overthrow the modern bourgeoisie springs from that bourgeoisie's own deepest impulses and needs:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and with them the relations of production, and with them all the relations of society. . . . Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.

This is probably the definitive vision of the modern environment, that environment which has brought forth an amazing plenitude of modernist movements, from Marx's time to our own. The vision unfolds:

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face . . . the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.⁴

Thus the dialectical motion of modernity turns ironically against its prime movers, the bourgeoisie. But it may not stop turning there: after all, all modern movements are caught up in this ambience—including Marx's own. Suppose, as Marx supposes, that bourgeois forms decompose, and that a communist movement surges into power: what is to keep this new social form from sharing its predecessor's fate and melting down in the modern air? Marx understood this question and suggested some answers, which we will explore later on. But one of the distinctive virtues of modernism is that it leaves its questions echoing in the air long after the questioners themselves, and their answers, have left the scene.

If we move a quarter century ahead, to Nietzsche in the 1880s, we will find very different prejudices, allegiances and hopes, yet a surprisingly similar voice and feeling for modern life. For Nietzsche, as for Marx, the currents of modern history were ironic and dialectical: thus Christian ideals of the soul's integrity and the will to truth had come to explode Christianity itself. The results were the traumatic events that Nietzsche called "the death of God" and "the advent of nihilism." Modern mankind found itself in the midst of a great absence and emptiness of values and yet, at the same time, a remarkable abundance of possibilities. Here, in

Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1882), we find, just as we found in Marx, a world where everything is pregnant with its contrary:⁵

At these turning points in history there shows itself, juxtaposed and often entangled with one another, a magnificent, manifold, jungle-like growing and striving, a sort of tropical tempo in rivalry of development, and an enormous destruction and self-destruction, thanks to egoisms violently opposed to one another, exploding, battling each other for sun and light, unable to find any limitation, any check, any considerateness within the morality at their disposal. . . . Nothing but new "wherefores," no longer any communal formulas; a new allegiance of misunderstanding and mutual disrespect; decay, vice, and the most superior desires gruesomely bound up with one another, the genius of the race welling up over the cornucopias of good and ill; a fateful simultaneity of spring and autumn. . . . Again there is danger, the mother of morality—great danger—but this time displaced onto the individual, onto the nearest and dearest, onto the street, onto one's own child, one's own heart, one's own innermost secret recesses of wish and will.

At times like these, "the individual dares to individuate himself." On the other hand, this daring individual desperately "needs a set of laws of his own, needs his own skills and wiles for self-preservation, self-heightening, self-awakening, self-liberation." The possibilities are at once glorious and ominous. "Our instincts can now run back in all sorts of directions; we ourselves are a kind of chaos." Modern man's sense of himself and his history "really amounts to an instinct for everything, a taste and tongue for everything." So many roads open up from this point. How are modern men and women to find the resources to cope with their "everything"? Nietzsche notes that there are plenty of "Little Jack Horners" around whose solution to the chaos of modern life is to try not to live at all: for them, " 'Become mediocre' is the only morality that makes sense."

Another type of modern throws himself into parodies of the past: he "needs history because it is the storage closet where all the costumes are kept. He notices that none really fits him"—not primitive, not classical, not medieval, not Oriental—"so he keeps trying on more and more," unable to accept the fact that a modern man "can never really look well-dressed," because no social role in mod-

ern times can ever be a perfect fit. Nietzsche's own stance toward the perils of modernity is to embrace them all with joy: "We moderns, we half-barbarians. We are in the midst of our bliss only when we are most in danger. The only stimulus that tickles us is the infinite, the immeasurable." And yet Nietzsche is not willing to live in the midst of this danger forever. As ardently as Marx, he asserts his faith in a new kind of man—"the man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow"—who, "standing in opposition to his today," will have the courage and imagination to "create new values" that modern men and women need to steer their way through the perilous infinities in which they live.

What is distinctive and remarkable about the voice that Marx and Nietzsche share is not only its breathless pace, its vibrant energy, its imaginative richness, but also its fast and drastic shifts in tone and inflection, its readiness to turn on itself, to question and negate all it has said, to transform itself into a great range of harmonic or dissonant voices, and to stretch itself beyond its capacities into an endlessly wider range, to express and grasp a world where everything is pregnant with its contrary and "all that is solid melts into air." This voice resonates at once with self-discovery and self-mockery, with self-delight and self-doubt. It is a voice that knows pain and dread, but believes in its power to come through. Grave danger is everywhere, and may strike at any moment, but not even the deepest wounds can stop the flow and overflow of its energy. It is ironic and contradictory, polyphonic and dialectical, denouncing modern life in the name of values that modernity itself has created, hoping—often against hope—that the modernities of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will heal the wounds that wreck the modern men and women of today. All the great modernists of the nineteenth century—spirits as diverse as Marx and Kierkegaard, Whitman and Ibsen, Baudelaire, Melville, Carlyle, Stirner, Rimbaud, Strindberg, Dostoevsky, and many more—speak in these rhythms and in this range.

What has become of nineteenth-century modernism in the twentieth century? In some ways it has thrived and grown beyond its own wildest hopes. In painting and sculpture, in poetry and the novel, in theater and dance, in architecture and design, in a whole array of electronic media and a wide range of scientific disciplines that didn't even exist a century ago, our century has produced an

amazing plenitude of works and ideas of the highest quality. The twentieth century may well be the most brilliantly creative in the history of the world, not least because its creative energies have burst out in every part of the world. The brilliance and depth of living modernism—living in the work of Grass, Garcia Márquez, Fuentes, Cunningham, Nevelson, di Suvero, Kenzo Tange, Fassbinder, Herzog, Sembene, Robert Wilson, Philip Glass, Richard Foreman, Twyla Tharp, Maxine Hong Kingston, and so many more who surround us—give us a great deal to be proud of, in a world where there is so much to be ashamed and afraid of. And yet, it seems to me, we don't know how to use our modernism; we have missed or broken the connection between our culture and our lives. Jackson Pollock imagined his drip paintings as forests in which spectators might lose (and, of course, find) themselves; but we have mostly lost the art of putting ourselves in the picture, of recognizing ourselves as participants and protagonists in the art and thought of our time. Our century has nourished a spectacular modern art; but we seem to have forgotten how to grasp the modern life from which this art springs. In many ways, modern thought since Marx and Nietzsche has grown and developed; yet our thinking about modernity seems to have stagnated and regressed.

If we listen closely to twentieth-century writers and thinkers about modernity and compare them to those of a century ago, we will find a radical flattening of perspective and shrinkage of imaginative range. Our nineteenth-century thinkers were simultaneously enthusiasts and enemies of modern life, wrestling inexhaustibly with its ambiguities and contradictions; their self-ironies and inner tensions were a primary source of their creative power. Their twentieth-century successors have lurched far more toward rigid polarities and flat totalizations. Modernity is either embraced with a blind and uncritical enthusiasm, or else condemned with a neo-Olympian remoteness and contempt; in either case, it is conceived as a closed monolith, incapable of being shaped or changed by modern men. Open visions of modern life have been supplanted by closed ones, Both/And by Either/Or.

The basic polarizations take place at the very start of our century. Here are the Italian futurists, passionate partisans of modernity in the years before the First World War: "Comrades, we tell you now that the triumphant progress of science makes

changes in humanity inevitable, changes that are hacking an abyss between those docile slaves of tradition and us free moderns who are confident in the radiant splendor of our future."⁶ There are no ambiguities here: "tradition"—all the world's traditions thrown together—simply equals docile slavery, and modernity equals freedom; there are no loose ends. "Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers, and wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly! Come on! set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! . . . So let them come, the gay incendiaries with charred fingers! Here they are! Here they are!" Now, Marx and Nietzsche could also rejoice in the modern destruction of traditional structures; but they knew the human costs of this progress, and knew that modernity would have a long way to go before its wounds could be healed.

We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives; adventurous steamers . . . deep-chested locomotives . . . and the sleek light of planes [etc., etc.].⁷

Seventy years later, we can still feel stirred by the futurists' youthful verve and enthusiasm, by their desire to merge their energies with modern technology and create the world anew. But so much is left out of this new world! We can see it even in that marvelous metaphor "the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution." It is a real expansion of human sensibility to be able to experience political upheaval in an aesthetic (musical, painterly) way. On the other hand, what happens to all the people who get swept away in those tides? Their experience is nowhere in the futurist picture. It appears that some very important kinds of human feeling are dying, even as machines are coming to life. Indeed, in later futurist writing, "we look for the creation of a nonhuman type in whom moral suffering, goodness of heart, affection, and love, those corrosive poisons of vital energy, interrupters of our powerful bodily electricity, will be abolished."⁸ On

this note, the young futurists ardently threw themselves into what they called "war, the world's only hygiene," in 1914. Within two years, their two most creative spirits—the painter-sculptor Umberto Boccioni, the architect Antonio Sant'Elia—would be killed by the machines they loved. The rest survived to become cultural hacks in Mussolini's mills, pulverized by the dead hand of the future.

The futurists carried the celebration of modern technology to a grotesque and self-destructive extreme, which ensured that their extravagances would never be repeated. But their uncritical romance of machines, fused with their utter remoteness from people, would be reincarnated in modes that would be less bizarre and longer-lived. We find this mode of modernism after World War One in the refined forms of the "machine aesthetic," the technocratic pastorals of the Bauhaus, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Léger, the *Ballet Mécanique*. We find it again, after another World War, in the spaced-out high-tech rhapsodies of Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan and in Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*. Here, in McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, published in 1964,

The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity. The next logical step would seem to be . . . to bypass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness . . . The condition of "weightlessness," that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace.⁹

This modernism underlay the models of modernization which postwar American social scientists, often working under lavish government and foundation subsidies, developed for export to the Third World. Here, for instance, is a hymn to the modern factory by the social psychologist Alex Inkeles:

A factory guided by modern management and personnel policies will set its workers an example of rational behavior, emotional balance, open communication, and respect for the opinions, the feelings, and the dignity of the worker, which can be a powerful example of the principles and practices of modern living.¹⁰

The futurists might deplore the low intensity of this prose, but they would surely be delighted with the vision of the factory as an exemplary human being which men and women should take as a model for their lives. Inkeles' essay is entitled "The Modernization of Man," and is meant to show the importance of human desire and initiative in modern life. But its problem, and the problem of all modernisms in the futurist tradition, is that, with brilliant machines and mechanical systems playing all the leading roles—just as the factory is the subject in the quotation above—there is precious little for modern man to do except to plug in.

If we move to the opposite pole of twentieth-century thought, which says a decisive "No!" to modern life, we find a surprisingly similar vision of what that life is like. At the climax of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, written in 1904, the whole "mighty cosmos of the modern economic order" is seen as "an iron cage." This inexorable order, capitalistic, legalistic and bureaucratic, "determines the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism . . . with irresistible force." It is bound to "determine man's fate until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt out." Now, Marx and Nietzsche—and Tocqueville and Carlyle and Mill and Kierkegaard and all the other great nineteenth-century critics—also understood the ways in which modern technology and social organization determined man's fate. But they all believed that modern individuals had the capacity both to understand this fate and, once they understood it, to fight it. Hence, even in the midst of a wretched present, they could imagine an open future. Twentieth-century critics of modernity almost entirely lack this empathy with, and faith in, their fellow modern men and women. To Weber, his contemporaries are nothing but "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; and this nullity is caught in the delusion that it has achieved a level of development never before attained by mankind."¹¹ Thus, not only is modern society a cage, but all the people in it are shaped by its bars; we are beings without spirit, without heart, without sexual or personal identity ("this nullity . . . caught in the delusion that *it* has achieved . . .")—we might almost say without being. Here, just as in futurist and techno-pastoral forms of modernism, modern man as a subject—as a living being capable of response, judgment and action in and on the world—has disappeared. Ironically, twentieth-century critics of "the iron cage" adopt the perspective of the cage's keep-

ers: since those inside are devoid of inner freedom or dignity, the cage is not a prison; it merely furnishes a race of nullities with the emptiness they crave and need.*

Weber had little faith in the people, but even less in their ruling classes, whether aristocratic or bourgeois, bureaucratic or revolutionary. Hence his political stance, at least in the last years of his life, was a perpetually embattled liberalism. But when the Weberian remoteness and contempt for modern men and women were split off from Weberian skepticism and critical insight, the result was a politics far to the right of Weber's own. Many twentieth-century thinkers have seen things this way: the swarming masses who press upon us in the street and in the state have no sensitivity, spirituality or dignity like our own; isn't it absurd, then, that these "mass men" (or "hollow men") should have not only the right to govern themselves but also, through their mass majorities, the power to govern us? In the ideas and intellectual gestures of Ortega, Spengler, Maurras, T. S. Eliot and Allen Tate, we see Weber's neo-Olympian perspective appropriated, distorted and magnified by the modern mandarins and would-be aristocrats of the twentieth-century right.

What is more surprising, and more disturbing, is the extent to which this perspective thrived among some of the participatory democrats of the recent New Left. But this is what happened, at least for a time, at the very end of the 1960s, when Herbert Marcuse's "One-Dimensional Man" became the dominant paradigm in critical thought. According to this paradigm, both Marx and Freud are obsolete: not only class and social struggles but also psychological conflicts and contradictions have been abolished by the state of "total administration." The masses have no egos, no ids, their souls are devoid of inner tension or dynamism: their ideas, their needs, even their dreams, are "not their own"; their inner lives are "totally

* A more dialectical perspective may be found in some of Weber's later essays, for instance "Politics as a Vocation" and "Science as a Vocation" (in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, editors and translators, *From Max Weber*, Oxford, 1946). Weber's contemporary and friend Georg Simmel intimates, but never really develops, what is probably the closest thing to a twentieth-century dialectical theory of modernity. See, for example, "The Conflict in Modern Culture," "The Metropolis and Mental Life," "Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality," in *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, edited by Donald Levine (University of Chicago, 1971). In Simmel—and later in his youthful followers Georg Lukács, T. W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin—dialectical vision and depth are always entangled, often in the same sentence, with monolithic cultural despair.

administered," programmed to produce exactly those desires that the social system can satisfy, and no more. "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobiles, hi-fi sets, split-level homes, kitchen equipment."¹²

Now this is a familiar twentieth-century refrain, shared by those who love the modern world and those who hate it: modernity is constituted by its machines, of which modern men and women are merely mechanical reproductions. But it is a travesty of the nineteenth-century modern tradition in whose orbit Marcuse claimed to move, the critical tradition of Hegel and Marx. To invoke those thinkers while rejecting their vision of history as restless activity, dynamic contradiction, dialectical struggle and progress, is to retain little but their names. Meanwhile, even as the young radicals of the 1960s fought for changes that would enable the people around them to control their lives, the "one-dimensional" paradigm proclaimed that no change was possible and that, indeed, these people weren't even really alive. Two roads opened up from this point. One was the search for a vanguard that was wholly "outside" modern society: "the substratum of outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable."¹³ These groups, whether in America's ghettos and prisons or in the Third World, could qualify as a revolutionary vanguard because they were supposedly untouched by modernity's kiss of death. Of course, such a search is doomed to futility; no one in the contemporary world is or can be "outside." For radicals who understood this, yet took the one-dimensional paradigm to heart, it seemed that the only thing left was futility and despair.

The volatile atmosphere of the 1960s generated a large and vital body of thought and controversy over the ultimate meaning of modernity. Much of the most interesting of this thought revolved around the nature of modernism. Modernism in the 1960s can be roughly divided into three tendencies, based on attitudes toward modern life as a whole: affirmative, negative and withdrawn. This division may sound crude, but recent attitudes toward modernity have in fact tended to be cruder and simpler, less subtle and dialectical than those of a century ago.

The first of these modernisms, the one that strives to withdraw from modern life, was proclaimed most forcefully by Roland Barthes in literature and Clement Greenberg in the visual arts.

Greenberg argued that the only legitimate concern of modernist art was art itself; furthermore, the only rightful focus for an artist in any given form or genre was the nature and limits of that genre: the medium is the message. Thus, for instance, the only permissible subject for a modernist painter was the flatness of the surface (canvas, etc.) on which the painting takes place, because "flatness alone is unique and exclusive to the art."¹⁴ Modernism, then, was the quest for the pure, self-referential art object. And that was all it was: the proper relationship of modern art to modern social life was no relationship at all. Barthes put this absence in a positive, even a heroic light: the modern writer "turns his back on society and confronts the world of objects without going through any of the forms of History or social life."¹⁵ Modernism thus appeared as a great attempt to free modern artists from the impurities, vulgarities of modern life. Many artists and writers—and, even more, art and literary critics—have been grateful to this modernism for establishing the autonomy and dignity of their vocations. But very few modern artists or writers have stayed with this modernism for long: an art without personal feelings or social relationships is bound to seem arid and lifeless after a little while. The freedom it confers is the freedom of a beautifully formed, perfectly sealed tomb.

Then there was the vision of modernism as an unending permanent revolution against the totality of modern existence: it was "a tradition of overthrowing tradition" (Harold Rosenberg),¹⁶ an "adversary culture" (Lionel Trilling),¹⁷ a "culture of negation" (Renato Poggioli).¹⁸ The modern work of art was said to "molest us with an aggressive absurdity" (Leo Steinberg).¹⁹ It seeks the violent overthrow of all our values, and cares little about reconstructing the worlds it destroys. This image gained force and credence as the 1960s progressed and the political climate heated up: in some circles, "modernism" became a code word for all the forces in revolt.²⁰ This obviously tells part of the truth, but it leaves far too much out. It leaves out the great romance of construction, a crucial force in modernism from Carlyle and Marx to Tatlin and Calder, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, Mark di Suvero and Robert Smithson. It leaves out all the affirmative and life-sustaining force that in the greatest modernists is always interwoven with assault and revolt: the erotic joy, natural beauty and human tenderness in D. H. Lawrence, always locked in mortal embrace with his nihilistic rage and despair; the figures in Picasso's

Guernica, struggling to keep life itself alive even as they shriek their death; the triumphant last choruses of Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*; Alyosha Karamazov, in the midst of chaos and anguish, kissing and embracing the earth; Molly Bloom bringing the archetypal modernist book to an end with "yes I said yes I will Yes."

There is a further problem with the idea of modernism as nothing but trouble: it tends to posit a model of modern society as one that is in itself devoid of trouble. It leaves out all the "uninterrupted disturbances of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation" that have for two hundred years been basic facts of modern life. When students at Columbia University rebelled in 1968, some of their conservative professors described their action as "modernism in the streets." Presumably those streets would have been calm and orderly—in the middle of Manhattan, yet!—if only modern culture could somehow have been kept off them, and confined to university classrooms and libraries and Museums of Modern Art.²¹ Had the professors learned their own lessons, they would have remembered how much of modernism—Baudelaire, Boccioni, Joyce, Mayakovsky, Léger, et al.—has nourished itself on the real trouble in the modern streets, and transformed their noise and dissonance into beauty and truth. Ironically, the radical image of modernism as pure subversion helped to nourish the neoconservative fantasy of a world purified of modernist subversion. "Modernism has been the seducer," Daniel Bell wrote in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. "The modern movement disrupts the unity of culture," "shatters the 'rational cosmology' that underlay the bourgeois world view of an ordered relation between space and time," etc., etc.²² If only the modernist snake could be expelled from the modern garden, space, time and the cosmos would straighten themselves out. Then, presumably, a techno-pastoral golden age would return, and men and machines could lie down together happily forevermore.

The affirmative vision of modernism was developed in the 1960s by a heterogeneous group of writers, including John Cage, Lawrence Alloway, Marshall McLuhan, Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag, Richard Poirier, Robert Venturi. It coincided loosely with the emergence of pop art in the early 1960s. Its dominant themes were that we must "wake up to the very life we're living" (Cage), and "cross the border, close the gap" (Fiedler).²³ This meant, for one thing, breaking down the barriers between "art" and other human activities, such as commercial entertainment, industrial