

Chapter 1 Modernity in Question

Mon Dieu! Qu'est-ce que ce monde.
—Last words of M. de Cinq-Mars

The concept of modernity is a distinctively modern idea. What else could it be? The term “modernity” seems to ask the question, Modern in relation to what? Obviously, something that came before. No one living in the fifth century BCE thought of himself or herself as “ancient” or in the tenth century as “medieval,” whereas we all consider ourselves to be modern—and in some cases postmodern—men and women. If terms like “modern” and “modernity” mean anything at all, they must be terms of distinction. Furthermore, the distinction between the ancients and the moderns is inevitably tied to the problem of the legitimacy of the modern world. On what does modernity’s legitimacy rest? This might seem a paradox. To even raise the issue of the legitimacy of modernity seems a fool’s errand. We inhabit modernity the way fish swim in water. It is simply the environment in which we live and act. Yet this is not quite the case.

The difference between the ancients and the moderns is not merely a question of temporal horizons. Modernity is a mentality. Of course, there have been many efforts to establish the origins of modernity or to somehow date its beginnings. Some have traced it back to the age of exploration and the discovery of the New World, beginning in the fifteenth century, others to the scientific revolution of Harvey, Galileo, and Newton, and still others to the philosophical innovations of Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza with their quest for new rational foundations for knowledge.¹ Modernity has been associated with the end of the devastating wars of religion that wracked Europe throughout the sixteenth century and brought about the beginnings of our modern theories of secularism and toleration.² It has been identified with the social and political revolutions of 1689, 1776, and 1789 that for the first time introduced the language of equality and the rights of man.³ Some have identified it with the new artistic and aesthetic developments associated with the high modernism of writers like Proust, Joyce, and James. Virginia Woolf memorably declared that human nature itself changed "on or about December 1910."⁴

The problem of modernity concerns not only its origin but also its meaning. Is the idea of modernity a coherent one? On one influential account, we have simply lost confidence in modernity. Modernity or "the modern project" rested on a certain claim to universality, that its achievements in the domain of science, politics, and law could serve as a model for humanity. The confidence in the humane and civilizing project of modernity was expressed in such documents as the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Universal Human Rights. The very terms in which these documents expressed themselves suggested a universal society based upon equal human rights and consisting of a league of nations devoted to maintaining the health, safety, and prosperity of its citizens. Today, however, leading opinion has increasingly lost confidence in these goals. This is in part due to the legacy of Marxism and postcolonialism that regards this mission as a thinly veiled (or perhaps not so veiled) form of Western imperialism seeking to impose its way of life on the developing world. It is also due to the influence of historicism or relativism that views all such claims to universalism as a disguised species of particularism. Modernity is merely one historical configuration now showing signs of exhaustion. Modernity, on this account, is on the cusp of giving rise to a new dispensation of history sometimes described as postmodernity, but exactly what this will look like is by no means certain.

Modernity has become less a cause for celebration than a reason for doubt. It is a register of the questions we feel about ourselves. Our belief in the fundamental benevolence of the West has been challenged by the rise of a series of oppositional ideologies—communism, fascism, and more recently political Islam, or "Islamism"—all of which claim to respond to a moral and spiritual void at the core of modernity. On this account, modern liberal democracy is the regime devoted to the satisfaction of our worldly desires. Its very materialism has become a cause of anxiety. This has meant especially sidelining or "privatizing" values of ultimate concern. In the language of John Rawls and his school, liberalism must remain neutral to comprehensive moral doctrines—doctrines about the good life, what makes life worth living, and so on—as being inherently controversial and therefore outside what reasonable citizens might agree to. As a result, modern democracy has been accused of failing to answer or even to raise the most fundamental problems of life. It is the materialism and technologism of modern democracy that has once again become a problem.

The Rawlsian conception of a world where rational citizens set aside their most deeply cherished moral conceptions for the sake of achieving a political *modus vivendi*—an "overlapping consensus" in Rawls-speak—coincided nicely with the claims about an "end of history" where the danger of war between the developed states had all but disappeared. The end of history thesis was never really about history but about the justification of political order. It was based on a revival of the Hegelian belief that the liberal democratic order represented the final form of political justification capable of providing a completely satisfying and fully civilized way of life. Democracies were supposed to represent the highest form of political development toward which all other regimes were either rapidly or slowly evolving. This doctrine appeared at just the moment when the ascendant market democracies of the West seemed to be achieving total dominance over their ideological competitors.

The utopian belief that with the end of the Cold War we were entering a period of democratic peace in which ethnic tensions would wither away and "soft power" could be used to resolve conflicts between states came to a stunning denouement on the morning of September 11, 2001. We find ourselves once again mired in the bloody and conflict-ridden domain of history. The hopeful vision of a global civil society designed to ensure perpetual peace seems to have foundered on the shoals of a political reality that has proved far more recalcitrant than previously believed. A resurgent nationalism and ethnic

tribalism in Russia and the Middle East has made a mockery of the claim that we have all become—or are on our way to becoming—liberal democrats. Once again we find ourselves in the bloody and conflict-ridden domain of history. Modernity has come to appear less “modern” than it is often believed to be.

These problems force us to return to the beginnings of modernity in order to see better what is at stake. The birth of modernity began inauspiciously with a literary debate called in England “the battle of the books” and in France the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. This was initially a dispute about whether modern authors should continue to be bound by the rules of aesthetics and literary composition that had held since the time of Aristotle. Were we simply pygmies standing on the shoulders of giants or could modern writers create works of their own that could rival or even surpass the greatest works of the classical world? The argument seems absurd today. What would be the point of arguing whether Shakespeare is superior or inferior to Homer or Milton to Aeschylus? But what began as a literary quarrel soon spread to areas as wide as religion, science, morality, economics, and politics. Francis Bacon, one of the most aggressive modernists, mischievously argued that those we call the ancients are not ancient at all. They belong to the childhood of humanity. We of the present are the true ancients because we have a longer wealth of history and experience upon which to draw.⁵ Knowledge advances with time, and it is we latecomers who have made greater contributions to the sum total of human knowledge. At the core of this debate was a belief that modernity is characterized by constant change, constant revolutions in knowledge, and that human life after these revolutions will be better than it was before and will be subject to continual betterment in the future.

MODERNITY AS PERMANENT REVOLUTION

The first author to confront this quarrel in a systematic and comprehensive manner was a Florentine, Niccolò Machiavelli. In the fifteenth chapter of *The Prince* Machiavelli threw down the gauntlet and declared himself forthrightly on the side of the moderns. “I depart from the orders of others,” Machiavelli confidently averred. “But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he

who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.”⁶

Machiavelli’s claim here was to put politics on a new—a modern—foundation, to give it a realism that it had not previously possessed, to free it from the illusions of the imagination, and to provide a different and to some degree “lower” conception of human nature that would be more in accord with actual human behavior. On Machiavelli’s telling of the story, the ancients were utopians, dreamers, who believed in an orderly cosmos and tried to figure out what was the appropriate human place within it, whereas the proper task of knowledge is to make nature serve our ends. He presents himself as the bearer of a new truth—*alla verità effettuale della cosa* (the effectual truth of things)—that is concerned not with how things ought to be but with how things are. It is knowledge of the “is” rather than the “ought” that is important. Machiavelli’s realism is often associated with a related claim that he is the founder of a new “science” of politics. By science is meant the causal analysis of facts and their relations, where causes are understood to be not the Aristotelian study of ends but efficient causes or the study of means. It would be based on a new appreciation for empiricism, an inductive spirit, that limits itself to what can be seen, observed, measured, and quantified. The new Machiavellian political science would be a science of power.

Machiavelli was not so much a modern as a prophet of modernity. His language remains replete with biblical allusions to prophecy, enslavement, liberation, and future redemption. Like Moses, he pointed the way to, even if he never fully arrived at, the Promised Land. He audaciously compared himself to Christopher Columbus, who had discovered a new continent, even if it was not entirely clear what he had found. Machiavelli helped to introduce a new trope by which modern people understand themselves in relation to the ancients, namely, progress. The ancients, on this account, were largely dependent on nature or *fortuna*. The founding of Rome, Machiavelli tells us, was a stroke—a very good stroke—of luck. But armed with the right science or the right understanding of nature and history, we can free ourselves from dependence on fortune. To be modern means to take affairs into our own hands, to achieve through our own unaided efforts what in the past had been consigned to the province of wish, prayer, or even the endless cycle of history. It is not as if people in ancient times were incapable of imagining a world better than the one they inhabited, they simply did not know how to achieve it. For the first time, we will be able to do freely and self-consciously what the ancients could hope to achieve only through chance. By following a deliberate plan of action,

we can do through "reflection and choice"—to use Alexander Hamilton's felicitous phrase—what in the past had been the result of "accident and force."⁷

For those who allied themselves with this program, modernity came to be regarded as synonymous with progress. Progress—or what today goes by the name progressivism—implies a certain attitude toward change. Certainly, the ancient writers understood the importance of change, but typically they regarded it as synonymous with corruption or decay. History is cyclical, oscillating between periods of freedom and despotism, civilization and barbarism. Periods of peace and freedom were certainly possible, but there was no reason to believe they would last forever. Progressives, on the other hand, believe that change is, on the whole, change for the better. Progress means a preference for the present to the past and for the future to the present. Older theories and doctrines were ranked as mere "predecessors" or "precursors" of the present and therefore evaluated as either contributions to or impediments of future progress. The scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provided the most tangible evidence for this belief in progress. Science, for the first time, came to be seen as a cumulative enterprise, a slow, steady accretion of knowledge that is in principle illimitable. There is no knowing where scientific progress may lead. We can only say that because all knowledge is provisional and subject to future revision, science is susceptible to infinite progress. And just as science has progressed beyond anything imaginable in previous times, so it was believed that the human condition might be susceptible to infinite improvement. Science is simply the standard that could be applied to every human endeavor. We are entering a new age—the age of Enlightenment—that promised to submit not only nature but all social, political, and religious authorities to the sovereign control of reason and experiment.

To be sure, no one imagined that the cause of progress would be unimpeded. Standing over and against the belief in progress stood the whole complex of theological politics embodied in the role of the church as the organizer-in-chief of our terrestrial lives. For centuries, the word of God and God's earthly interpreters in the church remained the unquestioned source of authority. In the case of conflict between the church and the worldly authorities, whom should one follow? To be progressive meant to oppose the "the kingdom of darkness," as it was called by Thomas Hobbes in the final part of *Leviathan*, as a shorthand for the power of the clergy, above all the Roman and Presbyterian clergy. Priestcraft designated the whole system of theological politics in which religious leaders used their powers to pursue their own interests to

the detriment of both good government and true religion. It was the independence of the clergy—its claim to serve as the ultimate arbiter of opinion—that early Enlightenment critics like Hobbes and Spinoza saw as the chief cause of civil war and the deliberate cruelty of inquisitorial politics.

The critique of priestly politics was the presupposition of the emergence of national states in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The concept of sovereignty that Hobbes was the first to develop as the cornerstone of modern politics grew out of the radical critique of biblical politics. The critique of religion was not merely a historical aside but (as we will see later in this book) the elementary precondition for the modern state conceived as a sovereign, autonomous political form. It was from the putative fact of revelation that priests and their surrogates claimed their title to rule. The belief in biblical revelation could not but pose a profound challenge to the national state as the absolute sovereign over its own internal affairs. For Hobbes, Bodin, Spinoza, and Locke, a whole new politics was necessary that would make a relapse into theological politics impossible. Theirs was to be a form of secular politics that would submit theology to political control, or in the famous phrase of the Treaty of Westphalia, *cuius regio, eius religio*; henceforth the head of each state would have the right to determine the religion of the state. These states were sovereign in the sense that they would be masters of their own affairs; they would put an end to the designs of a universal church, and deserve the respect of other states in a new international system.

Correlative to the emergence of the sovereign state was the emergence of the sovereign individual. No longer were men and women considered to be tied to a family, a polis, a guild, an estate, or a religious order; they were regarded as "by nature" free and equal individuals, at liberty to consent to whatever social and political arrangements seemed rational. Henceforward, the individual, free from all sources of tradition, was to be the locus of both moral and political authority. There arose consequently a new protean conception of the "self" as consisting of the capacities of willing and choosing, of free agency, and an awareness that we are dependent, not on God, but on ourselves alone to realize our own unique character. This new idea of the individual cut off from divine purpose or any assigned place in an ordered cosmos seemed to many a frightening prospect, but to others like Pico della Mirandello, Cervantes, Montaigne, Pascal, Charron, and Hobbes, it seemed something of inestimable worth.

Descartes is generally and correctly read as the founder of modern philosophy, the person who set the questions with which all later philosophers would

have to contend. This is true, but it neglects the fact that Descartes also developed the modern conception of the self involved in a lengthy voyage of discovery. Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*—I think therefore I am—gave philosophical voice to this new individualism. Underlying Descartes's famous discussions of hyperbolic doubt and the rules of method is a story of self-education, of his rejection of the books and studies of his elders, of his removal from society to the famous stove-heated room where beginning on November 10, 1619, he engaged in contemplation for three lonely days, of his decision to adopt a policy of resoluteness in action, and then of his wanderings and adventures before he finally settled in Amsterdam, where he could pursue his philosophy unbothered by the intrusions of those around him. Descartes's story is *the* modern story told many times over in such classic works of modern self-discovery as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Benjamin Franklin's rollicking account of himself as the original self-made man in his *Autobiography*.

The central claim of the Enlightenment and its progeny, however, was the belief that the increase in knowledge—especially scientific knowledge—will necessarily lead to a better condition of society. The Enlightenment was a project of education. The massive French *Encyclopédie* published under the direction of Diderot and d'Alembert was a barometer of the view that where advances in science go, advances in morality and politics are sure to follow. The modern age was to be an age of unprecedented freedom. To halt or reverse the increase in knowledge would be to halt the advance of human freedom. The advance of knowledge means emancipation not only from theological prejudice and superstition but also from the regimes of throne and altar that had ruled European politics for centuries. Since the optimum condition for the progress of knowledge requires communication between peoples, or at least between scientists and researchers from different nations, there emerged a preference for "open societies," that is, societies that have enshrined freedom of commerce and exchange, but above all freedom of belief and opinion. Societies that not merely tolerate but actually encourage the widest latitude for freedom of thought are the ones most likely to share in the new age of progress.

The great revolutions of the early modern age were all undertaken in the name of the progressive ideals of equality and human rights. These ideals found expression in the regimes dedicated to such classic modern principles as life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness. America was the first truly modern nation, that is, the first nation self-consciously established on the principles of modern philosophy. The Declaration of Independence, the Con-

stitution, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address express those universal principles that are said to hold for all people everywhere. It was in America that the doctrines of early modernity first came to roost. The founders of modern philosophy explained modern politics in terms of a history of mankind, a long struggle of ascent from the state of nature to civil society. This was a story about how an original condition of fear and anxiety, poverty and ignorance, came to be replaced by way of a social contract with guaranteed legal protections of person and property. By civil society was meant a certain type of civilization whose pillars were property, science, and commerce. It was the transition from natural society to civil society that formed the basis for the great Enlightenment theories of history given expression by Locke, Kant, and Condorcet.

The very idea of progress came to be inseparable from the great revolutionary movements of the modern world. Revolution had initially signified circulation, in the naturalistic sense of a return to a fixed point of origin. Polybius used the word *anacyclosis* to indicate the cyclical overturning of a state and its return to first principles. The ancient idea of revolution was conservative, in the sense of a return to first principles as suggested by the prefix "re" in the word *revolutio*. What distinguishes modernity is its claim of revolution as the absolute new beginning point. Revolutions were to be the veritable engines of human progress from which there could be no return. Revolution itself, rather than being seen as a rebellion against an ancient and venerable tradition, or even as a restoration of a noble beginning, was viewed as the harbinger of a better future. The progress of history may be thought of as a linear development, as conceived by Kant and Condorcet, or through dialectical stages, as imagined by Hegel and Marx, but this does not change the inexorable forward motion of the historical process. Revolutions came to be seen not simply as singular events in time but as a process of acceleration that drives history relentlessly forward, even despite the intentions of political actors. It was but a single step to see the whole of world history as a site of permanent revolution.

THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The difference between the ancients and the moderns is often framed in terms of a quarrel. Yet the very terms seem to risk anachronism. A quarrel implies a debate, a conversation. How can there be a quarrel when one of the sides is not even present to carry it on? To speak more precisely, the very concept of

modernity implies a break with historical tradition, with preceding patterns of thought and practice. This naturally raises a host of questions. What justified this break, and what makes it legitimate? What was so wrong with the past to make such a breach necessary? And is such a break even conceptually possible? The idea that modernity represents some absolute new beginning where the old is replaced by the new seems epistemologically naïve. Did the founders of modernity not continue to speak and write in the same language as their predecessors and therefore, even unwittingly, carry on certain common meanings and usages? In a similar vein, historians have shown that modern concepts and categories are themselves dependent upon earlier Christian ideals. For example, modern idioms of revolution and human progress are said to be merely "secularizations" of theological conceptions of new beginnings and eschatological visions of an end of time. In many respects we may not be as modern as we think. If these objections carry weight, this seems to cast doubt upon the very legitimacy of the modern project.⁸

The attempt to open the debate about the legitimacy of modernity has gone under a variety of different names, but for want of a better one, I prefer to call it the Counter-Enlightenment. The term "Counter-Enlightenment" was not coined by but is most widely associated with the name of Isaiah Berlin.⁹ Berlin used the term in a manner that was more or less synonymous with the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, he argued, was wedded to an unduly reductionist and monistic theory of human nature according to which human behavior is conceived as fundamentally uniform across time and space and therefore subject to common laws of explanation that hold true everywhere. Even today this remains the official view of the social sciences, which consider human nature as constant over time, responding to one or a very few number of variables. The Counter-Enlightenment, by contrast, insisted on the variety of distinct national cultures, conceived as organic bodies that develop according to their own internal principles, or what Montesquieu referred to as "the general spirit of a nation" that shapes its distinctive laws, customs, and institutions. The Counter-Enlightenment did not so much discover as rediscover the importance of national character, the idea that Spartans and Athenians, Greeks and Persians, Germans and Italians act on different understandings of the world and that these understandings cannot be reduced to the same uniform laws of behavior. There is, in fact, a pluralism or diversity of cultures according to which not only our secondary characteristics but even our fundamental human attributes—our heart, soul, and mind—are shaped by the inescapably complex texture of history and so-

cial life that we inhabit. The Counter-Enlightenment was inseparable from the rise of this new "historical consciousness."

I do not want so much to dispute Berlin's use of the term "Counter-Enlightenment"—I shall discuss it at some length later on—but rather to use the term in a somewhat more capacious manner to describe the movement of return that led to a reconsideration and deepening of the idea of modernity itself. My thought is something like the following. For each movement of modernity, there has developed a comprehensive counternarrative. The idea that modernity is associated with the secularization of our institutions has given rise to fears about the rationalization and "disenchantment" of the world; the rise of a market economy and the commercial republic gave way in turn to an antibourgeois mentality that would find expression in politics, literature, art, and philosophy; the idea of modernity as the locus of individuality and free subjectivity gave rise to concerns about homelessness, anomie, and alienation; the achievements of democracy went together with fears about conformism, the loss of independence, and the rise of the "lonely crowd"; even the idea of progress itself gave rise to a counterthesis about the role of decadence, degeneration, and decline. These are not so much antimodern conceptions as they are part of the structure of modernity itself. Modernity has become inseparable from the doubts we feel about it. This continual back and forth between modernity and its critics seems to validate what two German critics, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, may have been getting at when they spoke of a "dialectic of enlightenment."¹⁰

There is much to this thesis. Modernity could never entirely immunize itself from the very processes of critical inquiry that brought it into being. It was only a matter of time until the critical spirit that had once been turned against the past would be turned against modernity itself, creating its own forms of disaffection with the present. Modernity carries with it the same seeds of skepticism and doubt about its own project that it once brought to its examination of its classical and medieval forebears. In fact, I want to suggest that to be modern is to exhibit a whole range of uncertainties and pathologies, from Locke's sense of "uneasiness," Rousseau's "amour-propre," Hegel's "unhappy consciousness," and Kierkegaard's "anxiety" to Tocqueville's "*inquiétude*," Marx's "alienation," and Weber's "disenchantment." This skepticism has even led some to question the very foundations of modernity and to ask whether its victories have not been prematurely declared. The idea of modernity gave way to a set of related fears about the end of history, the emergence of the "last man," and the rise of the postmodern. It has been argued, with

some overstatement to be sure, that the principal beneficiaries of the Enlightenment have been the “totalitarian democracies” of the twentieth century whose vast schemes of social engineering were said to have drawn their inspiration from Enlightenment conceptions of the plasticity of human nature and the recasting of society.¹¹

Hegel and Marx were certainly right on one point. Every thesis contains its own antithesis. Every Enlightenment produces its Counter-Enlightenment. This is not to say that the Counter-Enlightenment was simply a movement of reaction. To be sure, there were and have always been reactionaries who think it possible to turn back the historical clock, to restore a lost world that existed at a privileged moment. But this was not the aim of the most profound agents of the Counter-Enlightenment. Their goal was not to restore a world that was lost but to create a more accelerated form of the new. Beginning in Germany in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Counter-Enlightenment started as a reaffirmation of the nation or national idea as something higher, nobler, and more worthy of esteem than cosmopolitanism. The particular was conceived as something greater than the universal because rooted in the insight that moral perfection is only possible in a small society, one held together by bonds of trust, friendship, and civic pride. This countermovement, as I have called it, has taken many forms, from the humane and liberal pluralism of Herder and Burke, to the romantic and aesthetic reaction of novelists and poets who regarded bourgeois society as entirely immersed in material affairs and therefore blind to the areas of beauty and human nobility, to the often violent and chiliastic repudiations of anarchists and revolutionaries who saw in modernity a “totalizing” or homogenizing culture that could not tolerate true individualism, difference, and particularity. These nihilistic repudiations have ranged from Joseph de Maistre’s call for a counterrevolution to nationalist and collectivist appeals coming from Germany, Russia, and parts of the contemporary Middle East that claim to assert their authentic and indigenous cultures in opposition to what they regard as the artificial and soul-destroying materialism of the West.

The Counter-Enlightenment often took the form of apocalyptic narratives of decline and fall. From Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*, Georges Sorel’s *Illusions of Progress*, and Oswald Spengler’s (mistranslated) *Decline of the West* to Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* and Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*—these works all declared the end of the Enlightenment often by turning the idea of progress against itself. They regarded progress not as the master narrative of human history in its rise from barbarism to civiliza-

tion but as one type of historical consciousness—one *weltanschauung*—among many that was now coming to its natural and inevitable end. Today these narratives of decline have only proliferated, even if they are likely to be more social scientific and less apocalyptic. Works that predict the imminent or future decline of Western civilization include Ian Morris’s *Why the West Rules—For Now*, Niall Ferguson’s *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum’s *That Used to Be Us*, and George Packer’s *The Unwinding*. Each of these works predicts—sometimes woefully, sometimes not—not only an end of Western civilization but the possible return of a new kind of barbarism. These predictions have fortunately not come to pass—at least not yet—although their warnings are worth taking seriously.

THE PROBLEM OF THE BOURGEOIS

Like the origins of modernity, the origins of the Counter-Enlightenment are the subject of endless debate. Who or what set off this protest movement? A convenient, but by no means uncontroversial, place to begin is the year 1750, which witnessed the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*. Rousseau’s *First Discourse*, as it became known, was a response to an essay question posed by the learned Academy of Dijon on whether the progress of the arts and sciences had contributed to moral progress. Rousseau answered with a decisive no. The century of progress, he argued, was not all in one direction. Progress in some areas has meant backsliding or even decay in others. “Our souls have become corrupted,” Rousseau complained, “in proportion as our sciences and our arts have advanced toward perfection.”¹² Scientific and technological progress could go hand in hand with a certain kind of moral corruption. Rousseau did not write as a know-nothing or as a kind of Luddite rejecting modernity in toto. His goal was not to condemn the culture of the sciences and the arts but to protect them from the inevitable vulgarization that comes with using them as an instrument for public education. It was just as important to protect the true Enlightenment from the corruptions of society as it was to protect society from exposure to the fruits of the Enlightenment.

The Counter-Enlightenment, as the term suggests, began as a movement of opposition or reaction against the twin engines of modernity—science and commerce. The new natural science with its mathematically inspired method was presented as the model for all forms of knowledge. Science was progressive in the sense that both its methods and its conclusions could be passed

down from generation to generation and therefore provide a solid foundation for future research. What did not measure up to the scientific means of exactitude could simply no longer be considered knowledge. Just as science hoped to limit the power of the imagination from engaging in metaphysical flights of fancy, so commerce was regarded as taming and pacifying the unruly passions and appetites, especially the desires for war, conquest, and domination. According to its advocates, the new commercial regimes found in Great Britain and the United States represented a safe and sane alternative to the ancien régime with its visions of moral grandeur, disdain for mundane employments, and preoccupation with intangible goals like glory and honor.¹³

At the core of the Counter-Enlightenment was a critique of a new kind of civilization that Rousseau characterized by terms like "uniformity," "duplicity," and "hypocrisy." Civilization was, above all, distinguished from culture. While civilization was associated with the development of the arts and sciences, cultures were distinguished by their distinctive folk minds or original genius as revealed in their language, poetry, music, and dance. Civilization was shallow; culture was deep. Civilizations could be ranked as "higher" or "lower" depending on their degree of social and economic development, but only cultures can be deemed "authentic" or "inauthentic." The idea of culture has never completely lost its original meaning as the culture of the soil—agriculture—while civilization presupposes the transformation of human beings into bourgeois and city dwellers. There can be primitive or rustic cultures, but there is no such thing as a rustic civilization. Even Kant, the great apostle of the Enlightenment, could acknowledge some truth in Rousseau's charge. "We are cultivated to a high degree by art and science," Kant wrote. "We are *civilized* to the point of excess in all kinds of social courtesies and proprieties. But we are still a long way from the point where we could consider ourselves *morally* mature."¹⁴

It was not civilization as such that Rousseau protested against but a certain form of civilization that can be summed up in a phrase: bourgeois civilization. This form of civilization had produced a new kind of human being, the bourgeois, who was polite, civil, and refined but also craven, false, and insincere. The concept of the bourgeois was something coined by Rousseau. I do not mean that he invented the term—long before him, Molière wrote a play entitled *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*—only that Rousseau gave the word its popular currency. In the opening book of *Emile* Rousseau defines the bourgeois as follows: "He who in the civil order wants to preserve the primacy of nature does not know what he wants. Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either

man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. He will be one of these men of our days: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing."¹⁵

The bourgeois, as described in this passage, is someone in between. It is not just to be a member of the middle class caught between the aristocracy above and the peasantry below. To be bourgeois is to live neither purely for oneself nor purely for others. It is to be caught between duties and desires, or in Rousseau's phrase to be "in contradiction" with oneself. The bourgeois is a victim of what the sociologists call "status anxiety." It is to be caught in between the natural man—the savage of the state of nature—and the citizen who is capable of acts of extraordinary courage and self-sacrifice, both of whom exhibit a certain wholeness or integrity. It was the allegedly contradictory nature of bourgeois society and the search for an authentically coherent form of life that would contribute so much to the power of the Marxist rhetoric in the following century. For Rousseau and later Marx, the modern state dominated by the science of political economy and an ethic of utility and self-interest lacked both heroic greatness and the rudiments of social justice.

The term "bourgeois" did not enter the political vocabulary until Marx, who borrowed much of his vocabulary from Rousseau. The word is most famously associated with the *Communist Manifesto*, where Marx described modern history as a titanic struggle between the two great social classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But even for Marx the term was not entirely negative. He praised the bourgeois class for introducing the element of constant novelty and revolutionizing the conditions of existence, for its destruction of "venerable prejudices" and the creation of new forms of life ("All that is solid melts into air").¹⁶ He distinguished between the early heroic period of the bourgeoisie in its struggle against the feudal aristocracy and the contemporary decadent phase of development where the bourgeoisie simply acts in defense of its own interests. The bourgeois is in Marx's analysis the same as the capitalist, and the rule of the bourgeoisie came to mean for Marx a form of civilization based on the oppression or exploitation of the working class. To be bourgeois means to be a heartless exploiter of one's neighbor and the products of the earth. It comes to be associated with absolute oppression, absolute injustice, and therefore absolute evil.

It was not Marx but Nietzsche who made the war on the bourgeois a virtual rallying cry. Like all the great haters of the bourgeoisie, Nietzsche, like Marx, was a product of the bourgeois class, one the scion of generations of Protestant pastors, the other a lawyer's son. Both were recipients of the ultimate

passport to bourgeois respectability—the Ph.D. The phenomenon of the self-hating bourgeois is surely one of the most arresting psychological phenomena of the modern age, giving rise to an extraordinarily rich literature with some unforgettable characters. (Why are there no examples of the self-hating aristocrat or the self-hating peasant?) Nietzsche brought this kind of bourgeois hatred to a pitch of perfection, tracing the ideals of modern civilization back to their English origins.

Three passages from among many can serve to illustrate the association of modern civilization with its English philosophical roots. The first is from Heinrich Heine, the most cosmopolitan German of his generation, who treated Locke as the source of materialism and a mechanistic theory of the mind. “French philosophers chose John Locke as their master,” he wrote. “He was the savior they needed. His *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* became their gospel, and they swore by it. . . . He turned the human mind into a kind of calculating machine; the whole human being became an English machine.”¹⁷ Similarly, Heine’s contemporary Marx associated the modern market economy with English ideas about free trade and the ethic of utility. “There alone,” he sardonically remarked, “rule Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham.”¹⁸ Or consider one further example from Nietzsche: “They are no philosophical race, these Englishmen; Bacon signifies an attack on the philosophical spirit; Hobbes, Hume and Locke a debasement of the value of the concept of philosophy for more than a century . . . it was Locke of whom Schelling said understandably, ‘*je meprise Locke*.’”¹⁹

The German contempt for Locke, the quintessential Englishman, says it all. No less than Heine and Marx, Nietzsche associated the English philosophy of Hobbes, Locke, and Bentham with the rise of a new type of bourgeois society based on the ideas of the rights of man and the greatest happiness for the greatest number. These concepts that played such a significant role in the creation of liberal democracy were seen by all three of the sources just cited to represent the degradation of society by reducing a longing for the noble and the great to something unpoetic, unaesthetic, and of course utterly materialistic. One finds in Nietzsche’s unforgettable portrait of “the last man” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* a depiction of the type of human being who will be the inhabitant of the mass democracies of the future, a world in which races and cultures will disappear, where there will be neither ruling nor being ruled (“both require too much exertion”), neither rich nor poor, neither love nor hate, and where the only real passion will be for comfortable self-preservation. This

is a universal society of free, equal, and prosperous individuals that Nietzsche could regard only with contempt.²⁰

Nietzsche’s fears about the last man fed the imagination of some of Europe’s leading philosophers, who saw it not as a projection of certain trends or tendencies of modern society but as an actual description of present-day reality. Nietzsche’s greatest disciple, Martin Heidegger, spoke of the “inauthenticity” of everyday life dominated by “the they” (*das Man*). The very impersonality of this new form of being testified to its “averageness” and “leveling down” of all possibilities. He uses the Enlightenment’s term for the public or publicity (*Offentlichkeit*)—a word suggesting openness, transparency, and civil society—to depict a world that has become permeated by idle chatter, superficial opinion, or what today would be called “buzz.”²¹ Although Heidegger did not explicitly relate his critique of publicity to the institutions of representative democracy, his contemporary Carl Schmitt found no problem in depicting parliamentary government as the regime dominated by a kind of endless talk without the ability to act. Schmitt enjoyed quoting the Spanish jurist Donoso Cortés’s sarcastic reference to the bourgeoisie as *una clase discutidora*—a discussing class, or a “chattering class”—to show the attempt to shift all political activity to the plane of conversation.²² It would be only a step from here to Schmitt’s embrace of an ethics of pure decisionism, in which choice is no longer the consequence of deliberation but has become an irrational and groundless act of will.

It did not take long for Nietzsche’s culture critique to find its way to America.²³ The concept of the bourgeois may belong to the high European tradition of literature and philosophy, but it has its distinctively American offshoots that focused on fears of conformity, the disappearance of the rugged individualist, and a pervasive averageness associated with what is often contemptuously called Middle America. Sinclair Lewis’s novel *Babbitt*, not read so much any longer, gave rise to the term “Babbitt” to describe the small-town American of the 1920s who joins civic booster clubs and praises the virtues of membership. The journalist H. L. Mencken coined the term “booboisie”—a combination of boob and bourgeois—to describe the typical democratic everyman. And more recently *New York Times* columnist David Brooks in his book *Bobos in Paradise*—a combination of bohemian and bourgeois—parodied the term to describe today’s high-end consumer Yuppies who engage in conspicuous consumption while paying lip service to liberal values: the kind of people who put an environmental bumper sticker on the back of their suburban

SUV. Books and films from Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio* to Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* depict an American modernity that is increasingly heartless, intolerant, repressive, and suffocatingly provincial.

But the Counter-Enlightenment also told another story, not just of decadence, but of a possible liberation. The story has been told many times and in countless ways about modernity's discovery of history and the historical method. The Counter-Enlightenment showed that the very idea of modernity was itself a product of history, no longer the absolute moment of a vast metanarrative but a distinct "moment" whose force might even now be spent. Modernity itself may be surpassed by a leap into an absolutely new and yet unknown (because unknowable) dispensation of history. The point of this act of excavation was not simply inspired by a messianic longing to "force the end" or issue in a new postmetaphysical era, although it took this form in the writings of Heidegger and other postmodernists. The Counter-Enlightenment was initially a movement of return, to excavate the foundations of modernity, to see where modernity began and what resources could be discovered to prevent its self-dissolution. Such a return was inspired not simply by a nostalgia for the old or a love of the past for its own sake but by the deepest and most enduring human desire: the desire to see for ourselves, with our own eyes, as it were, and not simply on the authority of others what modernity had concealed from view.

MODERNITY AND ITS DOUBLES

The question that I want to pose is this. How is it possible to retain a critical stance toward modernity and yet resist the temptation of radical negation? If the Counter-Enlightenment has been modernity's doppelgänger from the beginning, how should the challenge be met? The first step is to realize that the standard picture of modernity, embraced by both its advocates and its critics, is not in every respect accurate. The Enlightenment and its Counter-Enlightenment critics are not so much antagonists as copartners in the modern project. They represent modernity's doubles. Modernity is not monolithic, and it contains many competing strands. Dissatisfaction with—indeed, alienation from—modernity is itself a characteristically modern pose. How better to express one's modernity than by voicing one's discontent with it? But the critique of modernity need not result in wholesale rejection.

The best defenders of modernity have often been precisely those who have taken a page from the Counter-Enlightenment and yet have not been led to

embrace fascism or other kinds of "reactionary modernism."²⁴ There are ways of challenging the dominance of the Enlightenment without sliding down the slippery path to nihilism and bourgeois self-hatred. The author who comes closest to capturing this sensibility is Alexis de Tocqueville. Perhaps because he was an aristocrat, he displayed none of the bourgeois sense of anxiety and alienation exhibited by the likes of Rousseau, Flaubert, Marx, and Nietzsche. Tocqueville gave vivid expression to the fears about the age of equality. He was profoundly skeptical of the great middle-class democracies with their materialism, love of comfort, and belief in unlimited progress. Yet Tocqueville's work contains nothing of the spirit of *ressentiment*—the incurable desire for revenge—that Nietzsche saw as the besetting sin of the modern age. He saw democracy as a historical inevitability, but one that could still be moderated by practices and institutions favorable to liberty.

One example among many can serve as an illustration. Tocqueville recognized that the modern democratic age would be based on an ethic of self-interest, or what he called "self-interest well understood."²⁵ By self-interest well understood Tocqueville did not mean avarice or greed—it is not Gordon Gekko's famous "greed is good" in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*—but rather a concept comprising the totality of human aspirations. Self-interest well understood suggested enlightenment, reflection, and a spirit of cool calculation with respect to the manner in which these aspirations were pursued. Self-interest, when well understood, could also serve as the basis for certain civic virtues, not, to be sure, the high aristocratic virtues of beauty, nobility, and self-sacrifice, but a set of lower-order, more mundane, "bourgeois" virtues, such as cooperation, moderation, tolerance, and self-mastery. Such virtues were not to be sneezed at. Tocqueville did not rail against self-interest as something petty, narrow, or vulgar or view it, as did the followers of Kant, as a kind of perversion of ethics. Rather he saw it as responsible for certain excellences of heart and mind most fitting for an age of democracy.

Another thinker who imbibed much of Tocqueville's understanding of modernity was the German émigré philosopher Leo Strauss. Strauss may have done more than any thinker of the twentieth century to revive a serious engagement with Plato and classical political philosophy. In particular he resisted the facile association of Plato with totalitarianism that became especially widespread after World War II. His views of the ancients were complex. Strauss did not see them as a simple alternative to the problems of modern liberal democracy, nor did he see them as providing the first, hesitant baby steps toward the evolution of modern democracy. He insisted that although the ancients

could not provide ready-made answers for the problems of today, the pre-modern thought of the Western tradition—in both its classical and medieval variants—could provide crucial theoretical support for modern liberal democracy by recalling it to its often-forgotten premodern roots.

Strauss developed these ideas most vividly in his thoughts on the future of liberal education. Liberal education, as he conceived it, is etymologically related to the virtue of liberality that originally meant generosity or openness. A liberal democracy, therefore, was a political regime open to education of a very rare, if not to say rarified, kind, a regime that was both democratic and had acquired some of the characteristics previously associated with aristocracy.²⁶ A liberal democracy is therefore a species of what the ancients called a “mixed regime” precisely for its blending of democratic and aristocratic principles, that is, a regime where the fruits of liberal education are in principle available to everyone. This remained especially true, Strauss believed, of the United States and Great Britain, where the tradition of liberal education and the virtues of public service continued to be cultivated in the great universities, like Oxford and Yale.

But as Strauss knew, liberal education was for all practical purposes the preserve of a minority—he preferred the deliberately old-fashioned term “gentlemen”—who in the conditions of modern democracy could serve as a counterfoil to the pressures of mass culture. Modern education was increasingly losing touch with its foundations in the ancients and becoming ever more technical and specialist in nature. Rather than serving as a counterfoil to mass democracy, modern education was becoming its handmaiden. Only an education in the classics or the “great books” could provide modern men and women with the taste for excellence that they were being unjustly denied. “Liberal education,” Strauss wrote, “is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society.”²⁷ For comments such as these, Strauss has often been characterized as an elitist and an enemy of democracy. Yet he preferred to describe himself as a friend of liberal democracy, who, precisely because he was a friend, did not permit himself to become a flatterer.

At its best, the Counter-Enlightenment has helped to initiate a conversation between the two sides to the debate between modernity and its critics that was prematurely cut short. The purpose in revitalizing such a debate is not to declare one side the victor over the other—what would such victory even look like?—but to discover what we moderns have still to learn or at least

to discover what is important not to forget. In fact, as writers like Tocqueville and Strauss appreciated, the breach between modernity and its doubles was never quite as complete as some of the early moderns tended to claim. Important areas of continuity as well as discontinuity continue to exist and to play themselves out in often-fruitful results. It is to help keep this conversation alive that I have written this book.