

I

ON MODERNITY

In this chapter, I will attempt to delineate some characteristics of modernity. Needless to say, there are a great number of studies outlining the characteristics of modernity. But it cannot be my task here to review and synthesize this enormous amount of material into a consistent theory. Instead, I will emphasize just two major characteristics of modernity here in order to relate them to Talcott Parsons's, Erving Goffman's, and Harold Garfinkel's theories of social order and agency: pluralism and abstraction. It should be noted, however, that these two major characteristics overlap, and are even inseparable. I shall also mention some additional characteristics of modernity: the mutual autonomization of the individual and the institutional order from each other, subjectivization, the weakening of roles and the growth of individualism, and the regression into, and emphasis upon, the *'hic et nunc'* ('here and now'). Some of these additional characteristics can be seen as consequences of pluralism and abstraction.

MODERNITY IN CLASSICAL THEORY

Before looking at these characteristics of modernity, however, I will briefly address the treatment of modernity in classical sociological

theory. Specifically, I will review some relevant aspects of Marx's, Weber's, and Durkheim's theories of modern society, since these are widely appreciated as the landmark analyses of modernity in classical sociological theory. Simmel is another important figure in the classical tradition, but his discussion of modernity is excluded from this section since his analysis will be treated later, in my phenomenological approach to modernity.

Karl Marx's discussion of *alienation* (*Entfremdung*), is the *locus classicus* in modern sociological thinking of the concern with what I will call 'distancing,' a feature of modernity which will be emphasized in the analysis to follow. The concept of 'alienation' has at times enjoyed significant currency in political and professional discourse, particularly with regard to modern, capitalist society. According to Marx, alienation is an especially significant problem of modern work and the modern division of labor in capitalist society. Although Marx's analysis of alienation refers extensively to the economic sphere, Marx goes on to suggest that alienation in economic activity and labor relations cannot help but transform social relations throughout man's life. One ramification of alienation in the economic sphere is a general supersedure of personal uniqueness by impersonality (non-personality, or de-humanization). Alienation in Marx's work needs to be understood together with 'objectification,' and both have a meaning above and beyond any strictly material or economic meaning, comparable to that of 'separation' or distancing, in the general sense that subject and object are divided from the other.

Alienation for Marx is not only an unfortunate aspect of social existence in modern capitalist society, but one that is both exaggerated in capitalist society and unnecessary, given advances in the means of production. Alienation is a central problem of modern capitalist society according to Marx, and his work needs to be understood as, at the most general level, advocating some manner of 'reintegration' (Marx 1978, 84; 1961, 127) or 'reunification' (Ollman 1971, 135). A central insight of Marx's critique of alienation in capitalist society is simply the importance of recognizing "men as both the authors and the actors of their own drama" (Marx 1977, 206). Thus an emphasis on agency is part and parcel of Marx's understanding of modern society, alongside the concern with alienation.

Durkheim also is responsible for the currency of a concept which has been central for the understanding of modernity in sociological theory: ‘anomie.’ Durkheim’s theory of anomie is a key proposition in his sociological analysis of modern society, and he understands modern society to be characterized by a historically unprecedented or even ‘pathological’ level of anomie. Anomie is defined as ‘normlessness’ or lack of norms, but we have to recognize, with Olsen, that “such a condition rarely if ever exists in any society” (1965, 37). Durkheim’s theory of anomie derives much of its sense from the often implicit comparison to earlier historical periods, featuring greater levels of normative integration, a point which again illustrates the connection between the theory of anomie and the theory of modernity.

Be this as it may, it is clear that anomie is inherently related to *désagrégé*—a state of disintegration, or disaggregated state (Durkheim 1951, 289), or it refers to *dérèglement*—a disordered state or dissoluteness (Durkheim 1951, 253). Under the condition of anomie, according to Durkheim, individuals are only bound together with difficulty, and values lose their meaning or relevance, especially collective or cooperative values.

Durkheim’s concern for anomie, or a relative lack of normative regulation, should be understood in the context of his notions of ‘mechanical’ and ‘organic’ solidarity. Whereas earlier societies characterized by ‘mechanical solidarity’ did not face pathological levels of anomie, due to such factors as the similarity of individuals’ circumstances and occupations, modern society is characterized by an advanced division of labor, which means that social solidarity must be organic in nature, in other words, must be based on complementarity rather than similarity. Hence modern society faces unique challenges in providing overarching meanings and norms for individuals in diverse walks of life.

Like Marx and Durkheim, Weber is recognized as a leading theorist of modernity. Weber’s position on modernity has been termed ‘cultural pessimism.’ Weber spoke of the “fate” of modern society, and characterized it by means of concepts such as “bureaucratization,” “rationalization,” “intellectualization” and the “*disenchantment of the world*” (Weber 1946, 155). According to Weber, the modern West gave birth to a “new form of life” constituted by historical processes of rationalization, and becoming

more and more calculating, mechanistic, 'instrumental,' and abstract (Cf. Scaff 1989, 192). The term cultural pessimist has some merit, given Weber's often sobering remarks on modern society. For example, Weber suggests in *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*,¹

No one any longer knows who will live in this steel-hard casing and whether entirely new prophets or a mighty rebirth of ancient ideas and ideals will stand at the end of this prodigious development. Or, however, if neither, whether a mechanized ossification, embellished with a sort of rigidly compelled sense of self-importance, will arise. Then, indeed, if ossification appears, the saying might be true for the 'last humans' in this long civilizational development: narrow specialists without mind, pleasure-seekers without heart; in its conceit, this nothingness imagines it has climbed to a level of humanity never before attained. (Weber 2001, 124)

Weber's cultural pessimism is arguably counterbalanced, however, by his sensitivity to other aspects of modern society, such as individual autonomy, increasing subjectivity, and freedom, all of which might be appreciated rather than regretted, and all of which are enabled most fully under the circumstances of modern pluralistic society (Kalberg 2000; Smart 1999; Owen 1994; Dallmayr 1994; Maley 1994; Horowitz 1994; Scaff 1989; Seidman 1983a, 1983b; Tiryakian 1981).

With respect to all three of these classical theorists, then, it can be said that they were deeply concerned with cultural as well as structural aspects of modernity, and profoundly ambivalent towards both. Even though they differed significantly about the particulars, all three are generally agreed that the arrival of modern society came with losses as well as gains, and that modern society needed to be understood and evaluated in cultural as well as structural terms. Since the period of classical theory, a concern with modernity has more and more been associated with structural sociology, such as economic sociology, political sociology, and studies of international development or the 'world system.' Many of these analyses have lacked the subtlety of the analyses offered

by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, either because they neglect the role of ideas and values in social life, or because they don't go deeply enough into their subject matter to discover reasons for ambivalence. Sometimes both are true. It is my aim in the following discussion to counter-balance the predominant concern with structural aspects of modernity, to recapture the importance of a cultural or phenomenological understanding of modernity, and to revisit the grounds for ambivalence that come with any deeper understanding of modernity.

PLURALISM

Among the characteristics of modernity, "pluralism" is considered to be one of the most representative characteristics, and it has been explored especially well by Peter Berger. Pluralism, for Berger, refers to the "co-existence with a measure of civic peace of different groups in one society" (Berger 1992, 37). It is reinforced by urbanization, social mobility, market economies, modern communication, technology, and democracy. According to Berger, modernity pluralizes everything in ordinary life, "both institutions and plausibility structures" (Berger 1979, 17).

Moreover, the pluralizing effects of modernity lead to "relativism" (Berger 1973; 1992), because co-existing belief systems challenge each others' credibility. Berger states: "The world view that until now was taken for granted is opened up, very slightly at first, to a glimmer of doubt. This opening has a way of expanding rapidly. The end point may then be a pervasive relativism" (1992, 39). Berger goes on to argue that relativism is a consequence of "cognitive contamination," which is fueled by pluralism (1992). Put differently, the process of pluralization divides the social world into little sectors. It places individuals into situations in which they have to admit or accept unfamiliar or different people, practices, or beliefs.

Pluralization, then, pushes the individual more and more out of the familiar world, to depart into and journey across a fragmented world. Roughly speaking, the modern man continuously alternates temporally, spatially or cognitively through diverse sectors (Berger 1973, 184). Once on this journey, the individual

begins to reflect on his familiar world. That is the first step towards suspicion, which leads individuals to begin questioning the familiar world. Pluralism, as Berger and Luckmann nicely sum up, “encourages both skepticism and innovation and is thus inherently subversive of the taken-for-granted reality of the traditional *status quo*” (1966, 125).

Because his journey never ends, modern man is doomed to recurring suspicion. This is the very same phenomenon which the German sociologist Helmut Schelsky calls “*Dauerreflektion*” (permanent reflectiveness) (Zijderveld 1979) and which Anthony Giddens speaks of as “wholesale reflexivity” or “widespread scepticism” (1991, 27). With suspicion, the things (or worlds) taken for granted are put into question, and their ontological status becomes shaken, and then blurred. In other words, pluralism “undermines all certainties” (Berger 1992, 211).² What this means can be put quite simply; the pluralized world is filled with discrepancies and lacks all consistency, which is a necessary precondition for certainty. Modernity leads the modern man into a pluralized world characterized by “a multiplicity of incongruities” (Berger 1997, 202).

Because the modern individual continuously alternates between highly fragmented and discrepant social sectors, he comes to feel that he is hanging around on the outskirts of the world.³ This feeling results from a lack of attachment. To put this in a different way, in modern society the individual more and more feels he is relegated to a marginal region of the world, inhabiting borderlines between segmented social contexts. Due to his suspicion and continuous migration, modern man finds no place to anchor himself any more, and he wanders here and there, prone to distance himself from societies, social sectors, and individuals.

The concept of ‘distance’ should be discussed in somewhat greater detail. To do this, we need to refer to Georg Simmel. He formulates his observation on the problem of distance by pointing out the “separation between subject and object” (Simmel 1978, 463). Simmel points out that the process of separation occurs when various options are provided to a man, that is, when a man is located in a pluralistic situation. Simmel states:

No one speaking his mother tongue naively senses the objective law-like regularities that he has to consult, like

something outside of his own subjectivity, in order to borrow from them resources for expressing his feelings—resources that obey independent norms. Rather, what one wants to express and what one expresses are, in this case, one and the same, and we experience not only our mother tongue but language as such as an independent entity only if we come to know foreign languages. . . . Only where a variety of given styles exists will one detach itself from its content so that its independence and specific significance gives us the freedom to choose between the one or the other. (1978, 462–3)

There can be no doubt that what Simmel calls “*Distanzierung*” (the process of distancing) (1978, 476), is strongly and deeply associated with pluralism. The process of distancing can occur in all the relationships between man and objects, between man and others, and between man and himself. Simmel argues that in premodern times, in which mythology predominated, the distance within all these relationships was much shorter than in modern times. So, it is the modern man who first becomes conscious of distances (Simmel 1978, 475).

For Simmel, “*Fremdheit*” (estrangement or alienation) is another name of the process of distancing (1978, 477). Moreover, Simmel contends that alienation, or an “inner barrier,” is in fact necessary for the modern form of life (1978, 477). He suggests:

. . . the jostling crowdedness and the motley disorder of metropolitan communication would simply be unbearable without such psychological distance. Since contemporary urban culture, with its commercial, professional and social intercourse, forces us to be physically close to an enormous number of people, sensitive and nervous modern people would sink completely into despair if the objectification of social relationships did not bring with it an inner boundary and reserve. (Simmel 1978, 477)

If one understands that the process of distancing and alienation leads to an unprecedented quest for the ultimate or authentic meaning of life, it is not surprising that modern times are

characterized by “a feeling of tension, expectation and unreleased intense desires—as if in anticipation of what is essential, of the [definition] of the specific meaning and central point of life and things” (Simmel 1978, 481). For modern man, hovering between heterogeneous sections/situations, the process of distancing brings out tensions, frustrations and unsatisfied expectations. This is partly due to uncertainty, as we have mentioned.⁴

But, as Simmel points out, this uncertainty and irregularity is “the unavoidable corollary of freedom” (1978, 338). He goes on to argue that “the manner in which freedom presents itself is irregularity, unpredictability and asymmetry” (1978, 338). Pure freedom, then, is something completely “empty and unbearable” (Simmel 1978, 401). This notion has been expressed by Berger elsewhere; “liberation and alienation are inextricably connected, reverse sides of the same coin of modernity” (1979, 23).⁵ Thus, according to Berger, modern man can be described as a “very nervous Prometheus” (1979, 22) or as a man suffering from “a deepening condition of homelessness” (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973, 80). It might be argued more broadly that such characterizations of modern man are very similar to that of a permanent wanderer or stranger,⁶ since the stranger stays in a marginal terrain, distant from the center of society, where he is more likely to feel freedom, but also alienation from the mainstream. To that extent, it is plausible to say that the picture of the stranger applies to modern man very well.

There is, however, a more fundamental dimension of the freedom of modern man as a stranger. Modern man, inhabiting marginal regions, is less likely to take seriously matters of particular sectors; to use Berger’s phrase, modern man has more capacity to “take all serious matters with a grain of salt” (1961, 68). This capacity is one of the “fruits of marginality” (Berger 1961, 68). It is even possible that the situation of modern man leads him to an awareness that our whole social reality might be nothing but “artifacts” (Berger 1961, 71). As Berger suggests, what to the premodern man is destiny or fate is for the modern man a possibility or choice, and “destiny is transformed into decision” (1976, 16). Consequently, it is reasonable to surmise that within pluralistic, modern society, modern man experiences his actions and others’ as a sort of “art” for constructing a particular world as an artifact (Berger 1961, 76).

ABSTRACTION

I have suggested above that abstraction is a major characteristic of modern society, but before discussing the especially abstract nature of modern society, I need to discuss the abstract nature of all societies, of society per se. I do this to avoid the confusion between the abstract nature of society per se and abstraction as one of the major characteristics of modern society.

As Zijderveld (1970, 49) argues, society is abstract by its very nature. This is also recognized by Alfred Schutz (1962; 1964) and Maurice Natanson, especially in their treatments of anonymity and typification, which can be understood as aspects of abstraction. Focusing on Schutz's concept of "typification," Natanson (1986, 22) claims that the concept of "anonymity" is central to Schutz's theory. According to Natanson, Schutz thinks of the social world as the "home of anonymity and of anonymization" (1986, 21). And anonymity refers primarily to "the typified structures of the 'objective' aspect of the social world" (1986, 21).

For Schutz, there is no doubt that the terms 'typification,' 'anonymity,' and 'abstraction' are inseparable, and sometimes even interchangeable.⁷ Put differently, they are different aspects of the same phenomenon. But they are also essential for the constitution of the social world; without them, the social world would be impossible (Natanson 1978, 67–8). Natanson acknowledges, for example, that social reality "presupposes and is built upon the principle of anonymization" (1978, 69). Although societies are characterized by varying levels of typification, anonymity and abstraction, every society has them (1978, 69).

With regard to the problem of the self, Natanson presents two arguments concerning anonymity, drawing upon Schutz: anonymity as an essential ground of self (Natanson 1986), and anonymity as a starting point of transcending self (Natanson 1974; 1975; 1977; 1979). Put differently, anonymity is both a mode of socialization of the self as well as a mode of de-socialization (or transcendence) of the self. Even though the two modes appear contradictory, they share the same roots. Natanson elaborates:

Anonymity might prove to be a clue to selfhood. It would seem that everything in my discussion demonstrates the

opposite: anonymity, whether taken as acts of anonymous agents or aspects of integral acts, whether restricted to roles or referred to the vast realm of signs in the public world, is personless and constitutes a barrier to the fulfillment of individual identity. The apparent contradiction can be resolved in this way: within the essential anonymity of social structure, the individual locates the limits of the typical and comes to recognize what transcends those limits. This recognition is achieved by a self that encounters transcendence, a self that is formed in and through that encounter. (Natanson 1974, 75)

Much more simply, anonymity is one of the essential ingredients for constituting the self. To that extent, anonymity has a positive effect on the individual, despite the conventional, commonsensible, pessimistic critique of anonymity. If we bring together Schutz's, Natanson's, and Zijderveld's accounts, it would seem that anonymity and abstraction are necessary, for premodern as well as modern society. Abstraction, anonymity and typification allow for unreflective-repetitive behaviors, and things taken for granted, which are necessary as a base for the constitution of self as well as a transcendence of it.

Taking up the problem of the degree of anonymity, however, the anonymity of modern times appears to be extreme. Anonymity and abstraction are exaggerated and excessive in modern society. I would like to call this an explosion of anonymity and abstraction, in which these have outgrown their original, positive roles.

Because of the explosion of anonymity and abstraction, modern man has great difficulty identifying the basic grounds for constituting and maintaining his self, and identifying what would be a basis for transcending it. This has a direct relation to modern man's crisis of identity. The modern turmoil, resulting mainly from the disintegration of the stock of knowledge, as Schutz puts it (1964, 120), leads modern man into a travail of permanent reflection. To that extent, when Zijderveld speaks of abstract society, he means essentially the same process that Arnold Gehlen refers to as de-institutionalization,⁸ since both require continuous reflection.

Abstraction (or anonymity) is a shelter where the self can be fostered, raised, and hidden. However, with modernization, the

level of abstraction reaches its summit. As a consequence, modern man suffers from a confusion about his external life, and turns inward in a process of subjectivization. If we admit Natanson's suggestion that "anonymity replaces inwardness" (1986, 128), we can perhaps revise it to indicate that in modern society a high degree of anonymity (or abstraction) fails to replace inwardness, but is accompanied by a return to inwardness.

Following from the above analysis, the modern world can be described as a world of strangers. Because modern society is a world of strangers, it must be essentially abstract. What does this mean, that modern society is essentially abstract? Zijderfeld provides us with a useful illustration of the abstraction of modern society.

According to Zijderfeld, while modern society becomes more and more pluralized, society loses much of its "existential concreteness" (1970, 49). The loss of existential concreteness means the abstraction of society. An abstract society becomes unable to provide man with a "clear awareness of his identity and reality" (1970, 48).⁹ He goes on to argue that modern society has become abstract in "the experience and consciousness of man" (1970, 49). In other words, in the abstract society of the modern world, man does not "live society" any more, but "faces it" as abstract, vague, and opaque (1970, 49). As we have shown above, in the process of modernization, realities become more and more fragmented due to pluralization and specialization. Moreover, the segmented sectors of modern society are often inconsistent with, contradictory to, or distant from each other. In this sense, society fails to provide the individual with one coherent system of meanings.

Abstraction grows not only with pluralization, but also with geographic distance, size of society, and social distance (Zijderfeld 1970, 52-5). W. I. Thomas forwards a similar observation, by pointing out the vagueness of the modern world in his *The Unadjusted Girl* (1967):

The definition of the situation is equivalent to the determination of the vague. In the Russian mire and the American rural community of fifty years ago nothing was left vague, all was defined. But in the general world movement to which I have referred, connected with free

communication in space and free communication of thought, not only particular situations but the most general situations have become vague. (81–2)

While illustrating the phenomenon of the separation of space from place in modern times, Giddens (1990) suggests an understanding like that of Zijderfeld and Thomas, with his idea of an “empty dimension” (1990, 20), including the “emptying of time and space” (1990, 18), and appearing to have nothing to do with any given situation or face-to-face interaction. It goes well beyond that. And it is very anonymous and abstract (1990, 18–21). According to Giddens, the empty dimension is characterized by institutions which are “disembedded,” ‘lifted out’ of particular-local contexts of presence (1990, 21). These disembedded institutions are characterized by a high degree of standardization and ambiguity.

Within a similar context, Simmel also conceives of the modern world as an impersonal, objective and anonymous one (1950b; 1978). For Simmel, the modern world is alienated, due to the high degree of objectification¹⁰ and abstraction. He formulates: “The sense of being oppressed by the externalities of modern life is not only the consequence but also the cause of the fact that they confront us as autonomous objects. What is distressing is that we are basically indifferent to those numerous objects that swarm around us, and this is for reasons specific to a money economy: their impersonal origin and easy replaceability” (Simmel 1978, 460).

As Zijderfeld observes, when modern man tries to understand society in order to pursue the meaning and authenticity of his life, modern society immediately “evaporates” into “an awareness of loss of meaning and reality” (Zijderfeld 1970, 49–50).

More specifically, what characteristics are observable in the abstract, modern society? In his *On Clichés* (1979), Zijderfeld claims that abstract, modern society is characterized by a loss of “uniqueness,” and the “supersedure of meaning by function.” Drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “decline of aura,”¹¹ and Helmut Schelsky’s theories of the levelling¹² of modern society (1965), Zijderfeld argues that modern society is an abstract, “cliché-genic” society (1979, 26). He focuses on the use of language in everyday modern life, and observes that with functional exchange replacing meaning in language use, the use of clichés

becomes more and more frequent. Cliché-genic society, therefore, emphasizes functionality rather than uniqueness, and becomes more and more standardized and leveled.

However, if we look more carefully, we can see that clichés are necessary in modern society. My point is that, in the midst of an ambiguous, unpredictable, abstract world, which no longer provides modern man with stable guidance and meaning, the social relationships between modern individuals are endangered.¹³ Clichés have been the most important conduits for behavior, allowing modern individuals to connect smoothly with each other without any hassles. If one understands this, it is not surprising why Zijderfeld considers clichés to be “beacons” in a world of vagueness, instability and uncertainty (1979, 46). By the same token, the following insight from Hanna Arendt is relevant and suggestive; after observing the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt noted: “Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized *function of protecting* us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted” (Arendt 1971, 418; emphasis added).

To use a metaphor, a layman knows nothing about the mechanics of a jumbo jet—it is completely abstract. However, if he has a boarding ticket, he can easily board the plane and fly where he wants to go, without his ignorance causing any inconvenience. Clichés in modern times play a role like the boarding ticket.

Moreover, since clichés as symbolic tokens¹⁴ provide modern man with “some degree of clarity, stability and certainty,” they can be considered as the most important “institution” in modern society (Zijderfeld 1979, 72). Zijderfeld suggests that “clichés resemble institutions. . . . In fact, we could view clichés as micro-institutions, while the institutions of modernized society tend to grow into macro-clichés” (1979, 17).

It is easy to explain why clichés have developed into institutions: modernity undermines certainty. Everything is put into doubt. However, since the human mind “abhors uncertainty” (Berger 1990, 45), modern man feels uncertainty as a burden and pain. Therefore, modern man seeks to avoid it. If traditional certainties

in social order and institutions, and religious certainties, are no longer available to modern man, he has to find alternative certainties (or order), like the ones found by the characters in Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities* (1996), such as music or mathematics.¹⁵ Unfortunately, however, clichés have poignant limitations as alternative institutions. They, too, are inherently rooted in the ambiguity and abstraction of modern society. The clarity, stability, and certainty clichés provide are “artificial” (Zijderveld 1979, 47), and the comfort they give is nothing but a “temporal rest” (Zijderveld 1979, 49).

Despite the limit of clichés, however, it is still plausible to argue that for modern life, in which uncertainty leads to permanent reflection, clichés play a significant role in soothing, stabilizing, or mitigating the increasing tensions and burdens of modern man.¹⁶ Their “repetitiveness” allows some degree of relief from permanent reflection (Zijderveld 1979, 65).

Because modern society emphasizes functional exchange, it tends to forget its tradition and history. This ‘a-historical tendency’ leads to the ‘contingency’ or ‘temporality’ of modern social existence.¹⁷ Zijderveld describes this condition as the total absence of permanence (1979, 39–44). This absence of permanence has deep affinities with the “disposability of objects” in modern society (Zijderveld, 1979, 35). That is, in modern society, because of the pervasive notion that nothing is fixed, permanent and eternal,¹⁸ there is the feeling everything is replaceable, even human beings.¹⁹

In sum, abstraction, the decline of aura (or uniqueness), the emphasis on functional exchange, and the disposability and replaceability of objects are different aspects of the same phenomenon.

But abstraction is not restricted to society: it is true of people as well.²⁰ There is no less abstraction with individuals than there is with society. Abstraction impinges rapidly and unseen on the identity of the individual. It undermines to some degree his identity and self-concept.

How is this possible? First of all, in abstract society, personal face-to-face relations are likely to have been replaced by anonymous relations between social roles. To that extent, much of modern society appears to consist of socially “dead” places. For instance, as Zijderveld suggests, a supermarket in a metropolitan region is

a socially dead place because of its emphasis on function and role rather than personality (1979, 32). Individuals tend to be perceived or treated as abstract or anonymous beings, non-personalities who are objectified and marginal (Simmel 1978, 297; 1950a; 1950b) like “a guest in a hotel room”. In other words, the picture of a person as a concrete being with personal qualities disappears, and the modern individual becomes a stranger, a non-person without qualities. Like the abstraction of society, the tendency to neglect personal qualities illustrates modern man’s emphasis on functionality or utility rather than uniqueness. Put differently, in abstract society, the uniqueness of individuals loses its priority in social relations, and instead, functional exchange value prevails. Simmel suggests that the modern personality: “. . . is almost completely destroyed under the conditions of a money economy. The deliveryman, the money-lender, the worker, upon whom we are dependent do not operate as personalities because they enter into a relationship only by virtue of a single activity such as the delivery of goods, the lending of money, and because their other qualities, which alone would give them a personality, are missing” (1978, 296).

Simmel (1978, 389) goes on to point out the decrease of “*Vornehmlichkeit*” (distinction), which he considers to be a “*Persönlichkeitsideal*” (personal ideal), due to the development of a money economy in modern times. The distinguished person, according to him, is the very person who “completely reserves his personality,” and distinction is a “quite unique combination of senses of differences that are based upon and yet reject any comparison at all” (Simmel 1978, 390). Yet, the more functional exchange, like economic exchange, prevails in society, the less distinction can be valued and appreciated in men and objects (Simmel 1978, 391). Put differently, abstract modern society is populated by individuals who have lost their distinction, beings without qualities.²¹ This phenomenon can easily be interpreted, with Simmel, as “degradation” (1978, 390), and “lack of character” (1978, 432), and with Berger, as “the obsolescence of the concept of honor” (1970b).

Modern individuals, as beings without qualities, are not likely to be stable, but likely to choose or experience many changes. As Simmel aptly notes, modern man has a “penchant for change (*Variabilität*)” (1978, 462). With regard to this tendency, Berger

suggests that the “man without qualities is, at the same time, the man of possibility . . . The possibility of alteration” (1970a, 230–1). Put differently, modern man can be described as a being-in-alteration (Cf. Berger 1992, 114; 1961; 1966).²² It would appear that modern man is more, and more easily, absorbed with things, and also discards these more, and more easily, than pre-modern man. Modern man’s words, thoughts, emotions and actions become rather “unreliable and unpredictable” (Zijderveld 1979, 49). Therefore, modern man’s behaviors often seem to be capricious, and on the spur of the moment, and thus inherently temporal and contingent.²³

However, this erratic nature of modern man’s behavior can also be viewed as an attempt to overcome or escape “ennui or boredom,”²⁴ which seem endemic to modern society. To that extent, the contingency or temporality of modern life is closely related to the problem of boredom. Modern man, as a man with possibilities of alteration, is able to choose among a great variety of options. But what is distressing is that his fate is to be alone, choosing from a morass of choices over his whole life. Modern man can be seen to be tormented, and possibly depressed by endless choices. It is safe to hypothesize that the life of choices begins with nervousness, and ends with boredom. The temporality and contingency of modern life, which always requires modern man to make decisions, is enough to suffocate him with tensions and boredom. And then, modern man reacts to boredom with unpredictable or erratic behaviors again and again, which are characterized by temporality or contingency *in nucleo*. Thus temporality and boredom are engaged in a ceaseless feedback process. Consequently, modern man feels helplessly caught up in a life that is empty and void. With regard to this, we can quote the apt characterization of modern man’s volatility by Simmel:

The lack of something definite at the center of the soul impels us to search for momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations and external activities, thus it is that we become entangled in the instability and helplessness that manifests itself as the tumult of the metropolis, as the mania for travelling, as the wild pursuit of competition and as the typically modern disloy-

alty with regard to taste, style, options and personal relationships. (1978, 484)

The replaceability and disposability of human beings, and the emphasis on functional exchange mentioned above, are the clearest illustrations of the unpredictability, contingency, and temporality of modern man life.²⁵

By the very nature of contingency, modern man can also be understood as disconnected from his past. That is, like modern society, modern man as an abstract being is an a-historical being, without tradition. As Christopher Lasch (1980; 1985) argues, with modern man there is “loss of historical continuity” in the sense of meaningfully belonging to a succession of generations going back into the past. Zijderveld also notes a relationship between an “anti-institutional mood” and the “a-historical abodes of modern man’s subjectivism” (1972; 1979).

The picture of modern man invoked here is a somewhat pessimistic, grim and gloomy image of the modern individual, who appears to be much like a cog in a huge machine. This image might be appropriate, because it illustrates the alienation of modern man. Yet, this is not the whole story of the abstraction of modern man and society. It would be quite possible to approach the problem of the abstraction of modernity from a totally different perspective, one emphasizing freedom.

Just as pluralism in modern society leads to the coincidence of freedom and alienation, abstraction too provides for both freedom and alienation. First of all, modern man never completely becomes a cog in the machine. Modern man is continuously changing his roles, “like the jackets of a wardrobe,” and consequently he cannot “maintain the bond between himself and the institutions of his society” (Zijderveld 1970, 130). Whereas pre-modern man could not freely and realistically imagine this possibility, modern man can always—and sometimes must—change roles substantially and rapidly.²⁶ A permanent or perfect match between man and his roles is therefore only a memory or legend. There is, however, a more fundamental reason why abstraction allows the modern man freedom. Non-personality, anonymity and abstraction essentially guarantee freedom by their very nature. They are the home of freedom; whereas personal relations bring obligations and constraints,

abstract and anonymous relations bring freedom. Therefore, anonymity is freedom as well as alienation. Generally speaking, however, when we speak of anonymity, we tend to focus on just the latter. I believe that is narrow and one-sided.

Therefore, the desirable company for modern man, as Simmel (1978, 227) sharply observes, is the person “completely indifferent to us, engaged neither for us (friends) nor against us (enemies),” who is, in other words, anonymous. Simmel goes on to claim that freedom increases with objectivization and depersonalization (1978, 303). Abstraction, objectivization, depersonalization and anonymity reach their peak when the world is conceived as a “system of numbers” (Simmel 1978, 444) instead of as qualitatively distinct men and events. Again, viewed with a more jaundiced eye, the picture is a negative one in which all distinctions and characteristics of modern man are erased by abstraction. However, viewed positively, it is of much greater interest for us that abstraction has a moral character: it implies equality. That is, abstraction results in a “democratic levelling where everyone counts as one and no one counts for more than one” (Simmel 1978, 444). Regardless of race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, or nationality, no one stands above or beneath others. Put differently, equality can be considered as a freedom from the constraints of particular, personal categories.

In sum, the process of liberation, as Simmel (1978, 404) points out, is driven by the growing abstraction of modern society. The modern world is one of unprecedented freedom for modern man. Without stable characteristics or qualities, modern man comes and goes between diverse sectors of the world, treating others and treated by others as the incumbent of several abstract and anonymous categories (or social roles), but inwardly denying that these categories are essential to others or himself. After all, he tends to emphasize the fact that we are all human beings whenever he tries to connect to others, as if he notices the fictitiousness of social roles. He therefore experiences emptiness, loneliness, and anxiety, but at the same time, freedom. In a similar vein, Fromm writes in *Escape from Freedom*:

The individual is freed from the bondage of economic and political ties. He also gains in positive freedom by

the active and independent role which he has to play in the new system. But simultaneously he is freed from those ties which used to give him security and a feeling of belonging. . . . By losing his fixed place in a closed world man loses the answer to the meaning of his life; the result is that doubt has befallen him concerning himself and the aim of life...he is free—that is, he is alone, isolated, threatened from all sides . . . and also having lost the sense of unity with men and the universe, he is overwhelmed with a sense of his individual nothingness and helplessness. Paradise is lost for good, the individual stands alone and faces the world. . . . The new freedom is bound to *create* a deep feeling of insecurity, powerlessness, doubt, aloneness, and anxiety. (Fromm 1941, 62–3)

Similarly, Charles Taylor suggests:

. . . full freedom would be situationless. And by the same token, empty. Complete freedom would be a void in which nothing would be worth doing, nothing would deserve to count for anything. The self which has arrived at freedom by setting aside all external obstacles and impingements is characterless, and hence without defined purpose, however much this is hidden by such seemingly positive terms as ‘rationality’ or ‘creativity’. These are ultimately quite indeterminate as criteria for human action or mode of life. (Taylor 1975, 561)

Given these sensibilities, it should not be surprising that the occasional social theorist, such as Fromm (1941), discusses the possibility that the modern individual might want to escape from the new form of freedom present in modern society.

Because modern man is not anchored, but free-floating, without any destination, he conceives of roles as depending upon places and time; he continuously questions assignments of roles and the corresponding treatments and justifications, and ultimately departs to trace his true self (identity). As Simmel states, modern man is often characterized by an “insecure personality, which can hardly

be pinned down and placed” because his “mobility and versatility” saves him from committing himself in any situation (1978, 433). It can therefore be argued that for modern man “*Schlaubeit* (Shrewdness)” (Simmel 1978, 433)—or, what Zijderveld (1979, 34) calls the “art of performing itself” is conceived not just as a way of behaving, but rather a sort of fate.

Before concluding this discussion, it should be noted that Schutz’s and Zijderveld’s theories of abstraction do diverge in some respects. When Schutz speaks of abstraction or anonymity, they refer to sediments of meanings created through the “repeated action” (Schutz 1961, 20–21) of human beings. Abstraction, for Schutz, can therefore coexist with unreflectiveness. There is a terrain of freedom or relief which is rooted upon an unreflectiveness made possible by abstraction. By contrast, when Zijderveld refers to the abstraction of modern society, he means an excessive degree of abstraction. It is no longer an abstraction which provides for stable meanings, but which is characterized by permanent reflection, ambiguity, vagueness, autonomy, indifference, and remoteness. In Zijderveld’s case, freedom is based upon an abstract uncertainty, in the sense that uncertainty is accompanied by a sense of possibility and the capability of making a decision.

Whatever the differences, what is important here is that both Schutz’s and Zijderveld’s accounts of abstraction see it as allowing for freedom (or transcendence).

SOME OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERNITY

The two major characteristics of modernity discussed above, pluralism and abstraction, are accompanied by additional features, including the mutual autonomization of the institutional order and man, the weakening of roles and the growth of individualism, and regression into the *hic et nunc* (‘here and now’).

The Mutual Autonomization of the Institutional Order and Man

Due to the pluralism and abstraction of modern society, man and society are growing more and more autonomous from each other. Thomas Luckmann has called this “the discrepancy between the