

INTRODUCTION

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Formations of Modernity, as the title suggests, is concerned with the process of formation which led to the emergence of modern societies, and which stamped them with their distinctive character. The book addresses a number of questions which have proved to be of fundamental importance throughout the history of the social sciences. When, how and why did modern societies first emerge? Why did they assume the forms and structures which they did? What were the key processes which shaped their development? Traditionally, modern societies have been identified with the onset of industrialization in the nineteenth century. *Formations* breaks with this tradition, tracing modern societies back to their origins in the rapid and extensive social and economic development which followed the decline of feudalism in Western Europe. It sees modern societies now as a global phenomenon and the modern world as the unexpected and unpredicted outcome of, not one, but a series of major historical transitions.

The six chapters which comprise this volume not only map this historical process of formation, but attempt to provide an explanatory framework for this development. The commonsense term 'modern' — meaning recent, up-to-date — is useful in locating these societies chronologically, but it lacks a theoretical or analytic rationale. This book, however, analyses the passage to modernity in terms of a theoretical model based on the interaction of a number of 'deeply structured processes of change taking place over long periods', as David Held puts it in Chapter 2. The book does not collapse these into a single process (e.g. 'modernization'), but treats them as different processes, working according to different historical time-scales, whose interaction led to variable and contingent outcomes. As Held observes, 'the stress is on processes, factors and causal patterns ... there is no mono-causal explanation — no single phenomenon or set of phenomena — which fully explains [their] rise ... It is in a combination of factors that the beginnings of an explanation ... can be found'. We return to the implications of this multi-causal approach later in this Introduction.

The four major social processes which the book identifies are: the political, the economic, the social and the cultural. They form the basis of the four central chapters in this volume, and organize the narrative or 'story-line' of the other books in the series. In the next two volumes, *Political and Economic Forms of Modernity* and *Social and Cultural Forms of Modernity*, these processes provide the framework for an analysis of what developed industrial societies look like and how they work. In the final volume in the series, *Modernity and its Futures*, they provide the basis for identifying the emergent social forces and contradictory processes which are radically re-shaping modern societies today.

Formations of Modernity is divided into six chapters. In Chapter 1, 'The Enlightenment and the birth of social science', Peter Hamilton examines

the explosion of intellectual energy in eighteenth-century Western Europe which became known as 'the Enlightenment'. This movement gave definition to the very idea of 'modernity' and is often described as the original matrix of the modern social sciences. Of course, in one sense, the study of society was not new. Writers had been making observations about social life for millennia. But the idea of 'the social' as a separate and distinct form of reality, which could be analysed in entirely 'this-worldly', material terms and laid out for rational investigation and explanation, is a distinctly modern idea which only finally crystallized in the discourses of the Enlightenment. The 'birth of the social' as an object of knowledge made possible for the first time the systematic analysis and the practices of investigation we call 'the social sciences'.

Chapter 1 examines the historical and geographical context of the European Enlightenment, and the vision of intellectual emancipation which seized its principal figures — the *philosophes* — including such major precursors of modern social theory as Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, and the luminaries of the 'Scottish Enlightenment' such as David Hume, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson. It discusses the Enlightenment critique of traditional authority and examines some of its leading ideas — progress, science, reason, and nature. These gave shape to the 'promise' of the Enlightenment — the prospect which it opened up of an unending era of material progress and prosperity, the abolition of prejudice and superstition and the mastery of the forces of nature based on the expansion of human knowledge and understanding. The chapter takes the story forward, through the Romantic movement and the French Revolution to those major theorists of nineteenth-century social science — Saint-Simon and Comte. It looks forward to that later moment, at the end of the nineteenth century, when the social sciences were once again reorganized.

This second moment in the development of the social sciences — between 1890 and 1920 — was the time of what are now known as the 'founding figures' of sociology: Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and Tönnies. Thereafter the social sciences became more compartmentalized into their separate disciplines, more specialized and empirical, more 'scientific' (positivistic) and more closely engaged with application to the 'real world' through social engineering. Nevertheless, these classical figures of modern sociology also undertook a major examination of the formation of the modern world and its 'laws of development', not unlike that which the Enlightenment *philosophes* had inaugurated. These Enlightenment concerns continue to underpin the social sciences today. Indeed, in recent years, there has been a remarkable revival in historical sociology, which is concerned with these questions of long-term transformation and development; and, interestingly, they are being pursued in a more interdisciplinary way, drawing together the researches of sociologists, economic and social historians, political theorists and philosophers. It is as if these profound questions about the origin and destiny of the modern world are surfacing again at the very moment when modernity itself — its promise and its vicissitudes — is

being put in question. This book draws on much of that new work in historical sociology and reflects these emerging concerns and debates.

The second chapter 'The development of the modern state' opens by examining the formation of the modern state. David Held sees the modern state emerging at the intersection of the national and international systems. He traces the state's development through a variety of historical forms — from the classical European empires, the divided authority of the feudal states (Papacy and Holy Roman Empire), the estates system and the absolutisms of the early modern period, to the emergence of the forms of political authority, secular power, legitimacy and sovereignty characteristic of the modern *nation-state*. The chapter considers the roles of warfare, militarism and capitalism in underpinning the supremacy of this nation-state form. It discusses the system of nation-states as the foundation of the modern international order. Into this story are woven the changing conceptions of politics elaborated in western political philosophy by writers such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Marx and Weber. The chapter looks forward to the emergence of liberal democracy as the privileged twentieth-century state form of modern societies in the West.

(5) In Chapter 3, 'The emergence of the economy', Vivienne Brown examines the formation of a distinct sphere of economic life, governed by new economic relations, and regulated and represented by new economic ideas. She describes the spread of commerce and trade, the expansion of markets, the new division of labour and the growth of material wealth and consumption — 'opulence' — in eighteenth-century British society, consequent upon the rise of capitalism in Europe and the gradual transformation of the traditional economy. European economic development began early — some date it as early as the fifteenth century — and the expansion of trade and the market was at the centre of the process. But for a long time, capitalism developed under the protective shadow of state monopolies at home and mercantilism overseas. By the eighteenth century, however, *laissez-faire* and the market forces of the private economy were beginning to unleash the productive energies of the capitalist system. Vivienne Brown reminds us that the engines of this development were the commercial and agrarian revolutions. The economic model in the mind of Adam Smith when he wrote *The Wealth of Nations* — that bible of capitalist development — was agrarian and commercial capitalism, not the industrial smokestacks and factory-hands of Marx and Engels. The chapter weaves together an account of the formation of the modern economy and the new ways of speaking and thinking about economic life — the new economic discourse — which emerged in the eighteenth century. It provides a re-reading of Adam Smith's classic work, which became such a landmark text of the modern age, and sets its ideas in their proper historical and moral contexts.

In Chapter 4, 'Changing social structures: class and gender', Harriet Bradley takes the story forwards from the agrarian and commercial revolutions of the eighteenth century to the upheavals of the Industrial

Revolution of the nineteenth. She also shifts the focus from economic processes to the changing social relations and the new type of social structure characteristic of industrial capitalist society. Her chapter is concerned with the emergence of new social and sexual divisions of labour. She contrasts the class and gender formations of pre-industrial, rural society with the rise of the new social classes, organized around capital and waged labour; the work patterns associated with the new forms of industrial production; and the new relations between men and women, organized around the shifting distinctions between the public and the private, work and home, the public world and the family and household.

The chapter discusses some of the major sociological theories and models of class formation. It also deploys the concepts of gender, patriarchy, and family which feminist social theorists have advanced in the social science agenda and which are increasingly problematizing 'class' as the master (sic) explanatory category. Harriet Bradley analyses the social structure of industrial society in terms of the deep interpenetration of class *and* gender. The chapter points forward to how these class and gender structures evolved and were complicated by questions of race and ethnicity in the twentieth century.

In Chapter 5, 'The cultural formations of modern society', Robert Bocock looks at the increasing importance given to the analysis of culture, meaning, language and the symbolic structures of social life in contemporary social theory — what the anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss, identified as 'the study of the life of signs at the heart of social life'. The chapter then turns to a discussion of three key cultural themes in the transition to modernity. First, the shift from a religious to a secular world-view, and from a 'sacred' to a 'profane' foundation for social and moral values, which characterizes the passage from traditional society to modern society. Second, the role which religion played in the formation of the 'spirit of capitalism' — a discussion of Max Weber's thesis about 'the Protestant ethic'. Third, the growing awareness among western philosophers and social theorists of the costs of modern culture — what Freud called civilization's 'discontents', and Weber saw as the consequences of the increasing rationalization and disenchantment of the modern world. This final theme points forward to recent critiques of the 'promise' of the Enlightenment, which are taken up in subsequent volumes in the series. It shows that a pessimistic assessment of enlightenment and modernity has in fact been part of Enlightenment reason — its 'dark shadow' — from its very inception.

Finally, in Chapter 6, 'The West and the Rest: discourse and power', Stuart Hall places the early Europe-centred — and Euro-centric — account of the evolution of modern societies and modernity in the West, in a wider global context. The gradual integration of Western Europe, its take-off into sustained economic growth, the emergence of the system of powerful nation-states, and other features of the formation of modern societies is often told as a purely *internal* story — as if Europe provided all the conditions, materials and dynamic necessary for its own development from within itself. This view is challenged at several

places in this book and Chapter 6 reminds us, once again, that the process also had *external* and global conditions of existence. The particular form of 'globalization' which is undermining and transforming modernity today (the internationalization of production, consumption, markets and investment), is only the latest phase in a very long story; it is not a new phenomenon. The early expansion of the European maritime empires in the fifteenth century, the exploration of new worlds, the encounter with new peoples and civilizations very different from that of Europe, and the harnessing of them to the dynamic development of Europe through commerce, conquest and colonization are key episodes (but often neglected ones) in the formation of modern societies and the modern age.

Chapter 6 argues that the integration of Western Europe also involved the construction of a new sense of cultural identity. Europe only discovered and produced this new identity in the course of representing itself as a distinct, unique and triumphant civilization, and at the same time marking its difference from other cultures, peoples, and civilizations. These 'Others' were incorporated into the West's image of itself — into its language, its systems of representation, its forms of knowledge, its visual imagery, even its conception of what sorts of people did and did not have access to reason itself. This encounter with difference and the construction of 'otherness' is sketched in relation to the European exploration and conquest of the Americas, Asia, Africa and the Pacific between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. The chapter analyses the formation of these discourses of 'self' and 'otherness', through which the West came to represent itself and imagine its difference from 'the Rest'. It looks forward, across the centuries, to the way these images of the West and 'the Rest' resurface in contemporary discourses of race and ethnicity, at a time when 'the Other' is beginning to question and contest the 'centredness' of the West, which western civilization (and western social science) has for so long taken for granted.

We can now turn to consider in greater detail some of the themes and approaches in this book. As noted earlier, the account of the formation of modern societies is organized principally in terms of four major processes — the political, the economic, the social and the cultural. The transition to modernity is explained in terms of the interaction between these four processes. It could not have occurred without them. No one process, on its own, provides an adequate explanation of the formation of modern societies. Consequently, no one process is accorded explanatory priority in the analysis. Analytically, we treat each process as distinct — an approach which has certain consequences to which we shall return in a moment. However, it must be borne in mind that, in 'real' historical time, they interacted with one another. The evolution of the modern state, for example, has a different history from that of the modern economy. Nevertheless the nation-state provided the institutional framework and shared legal and political norms which

facilitated the expansion of the national economy. Modernity, then, was the outcome, not of a single process, but of the condensation of a number of different processes and histories.

How does this relate to the definition of a society as 'modern'? What characteristics must it have to merit that description?

What we mean by 'modern' is that each process led to the emergence of certain distinctive features or social characteristics, and it is these features which, taken together, provide us with our definition of 'modernity'. In this sense, the term 'modern' does not mean simply that the phenomenon is of recent origin. It carries a certain analytic and theoretical value, because it is related to a conceptual model. What are these defining features or characteristics of modern societies?

The dominance of secular forms of political power and authority and conceptions of sovereignty and legitimacy, operating within defined territorial boundaries, which are characteristic of the large, complex structures of the modern nation-state.

A monetarized exchange economy, based on the large-scale production and consumption of commodities for the market, extensive ownership of private property and the accumulation of capital on a systematic, long-term basis. (The economies of eastern European communist states were an exception to some of these features, though they were based on the large-scale industrial production and consumption of goods.)

The decline of the traditional social order, with its fixed social hierarchies and overlapping allegiances, and the appearance of a dynamic social and sexual division of labour. In modern capitalist societies, this was characterized by new class formations, and distinctive patriarchal relations between men and women.

The decline of the religious world view typical of traditional societies and the rise of a secular and materialist culture, exhibiting those individualistic, rationalist, and instrumental impulses now so familiar to us.

There are two other aspects to our definition of modernity, which should be loosely included under the rubric of 'the cultural'. The first refers to ways of producing and classifying knowledge. The emergence of modern societies was marked by the birth of a new intellectual and cognitive world, which gradually emerged with the Reformation, the Renaissance, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. This shift in Europe's intellectual and moral universe was dramatic, and as constitutive for the formation of modern societies as early capitalism or the rise of the nation-state. Second, the book follows modern social analysis in the emphasis it gives to the construction of cultural and social identities as part of the formation process. By this we mean the construction of a sense of belonging which draws people together into an 'imagined community' and the construction of symbolic boundaries which define who does *not* belong or is excluded from it. For many centuries, being

'Christian' or 'Catholic' was the only common identity shared by the peoples of Western Europe. 'European' was an identity which only slowly emerged. So the formation of modern societies in Europe had to include the construction of the language, the images, and symbols which defined these societies as 'communities' and set them apart, in their represented differences, from others.

The importance given to major historical processes helps to explain the significance of the term 'formations' in our title. The political, economic, social, and cultural processes were the 'motors' of the formation process. They worked on and transformed traditional societies into modern ones. They shaped modern society across a long historical time-span. We speak of processes, rather than practices because, although processes are made up of the activities of individual and collective social agents, they operate across extended time-scales, and seem at times to work on their own, in performing the work of social transformation. One effect of the operation of these processes is to give modern societies a distinctive shape and form, making them not simply 'societies' (a loose ensemble of social activities) but *social formations* (societies with a definite structure and a well-defined set of social relations). One particular feature of modern social formations is that they became articulated into distinct, clearly demarcated zones of activity or social practice. We call these domains — corresponding to the processes which produced them — the polity, the economy, the social structure and the cultural sphere. These spheres are the 'formations' of modern societies. *Formations*, then, in our title refers to *both* the activities of emergence, and their outcomes or results: both process *and* structure.

The next aspect which deserves discussion is the role of history in the book. As we noted earlier, *Formations of Modernity* adopts a historical perspective on the emergence of modern societies. The relation between history and the social sciences has often been a troubled one. Our aim is to map long-term historical trends and changing social patterns. There is an extensive use of historical evidence; a number of summary histories are embedded in the chapters, which provide a historical context and chronological framework for different aspects of the formation process; and there are several comparative historical case studies. We also use simple contrasts (e.g. feudalism vs capitalism), summarizing concepts (e.g. traditional vs modern society) and rough-and-ready chronologies (e.g. towards the end of the fifteenth century).

However, there is no attempt to match the detail and specificity which is the hallmark of modern historical scholarship. By contrast, these accounts make extensive use of *historical generalizations*. Generalizations always abstract from the rich detail of complex events — that is their function. There is nothing wrong with this: all serious intellectual work involves abstraction. The point, however, is always to bear in mind the *level of abstraction* at which the generalizations are working. Each level has its strengths (i.e. it is good for highlighting some aspects) and its limitations (it is obliged to leave out much of importance).

Formations of Modernity works with historical generalizations, because its purpose is not only to describe when and how modern society developed, but to explain *why* it happened. However, describing a process and providing an explanation are more closely related than is sometimes assumed. The sociologist Michael Mann has remarked that 'the greatest contribution of the historian to the methodology of the social sciences is the date', by which he meant that careful periodization is an essential part of explaining the development of any social phenomenon. As he went on to say, '... when things happened is essential to establishing causality' (Mann, 1988, p.6). In *Formations*, care is taken to establish, as far as possible, when things happened. This includes simple things like giving the dates of major figures, key events or important texts. The point is not to oblige readers to memorize dates but to help them develop a sense of historical time, context and sequence. However, readers will notice that there is no attempt to provide a precise date when modern societies began. There are at least several reasons for this reluctance.

First, the formation processes operated across several centuries and in a slow, uneven way, so it is difficult to identify a clear starting point. For example, when exactly does trade and commerce cease to be the economic basis of a few European cities — Venice, Florence, Bruges — and become the dominant economic form of western societies as a whole? Another reason is that there is no convenient cut-off point between what emerged and what went before. The processes we have identified as necessary to modern formation worked on and transformed already-existing societies. Those 'traditional' societies were the 'raw materials', the preconditions of modernity — the cloth out of which its shapes were cut. Modern capitalism sprang up in the interstices of the feudal economy. The modern nation-state was carved out of the old feudal and absolutist systems. So where does modern history really start — since it seems to have been always-already in process? This is an old problem in historical explanation — what is sometimes known as the danger of infinite regress, which, if we aren't careful, will transport us back to the beginning of time! Of course, this does not mean that history just seamlessly unfolded. That would be to hold an evolutionary model of historical development. In fact, as we show, as well as continuities connecting one historical phase or period to another, history is also full of *discontinuities* — breaks, ruptures, reversals. The focus on 'transitions' in this book is designed precisely to emphasize these significant breaks in historical development.

Another reason for avoiding a simple date when modern societies began is that, as we noted earlier, the processes which form the main explanatory framework of the book had different time-scales. They began at different times, followed different trajectories, had different turning-points and seem to exhibit different *tempos* of development. This is reflected in the different periodizations used in each chapter. Chapter 2 takes the history of the modern state back to the Greek and Roman empires. Chapter 3 on the economy is mainly an eighteenth-

century story. Chapter 4, on the industrial social structure, focuses on the nineteenth century. Chapter 5 begins with the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. And the last chapter begins with Portuguese explorations in the fifteenth century.

Therefore, it does not make much sense to say that modern societies started at the same moment and developed uniformly within a single historical 'time'. The modern state, for example, has a very different 'history' and 'time' from the capitalist economy. Thus you will find that, although the various chapters cross-refer to different processes, they do not chart the formation of modern societies as a single historical process. The book has been written in the aftermath of the break-up of a more uniform conception of history which tended to dominate nineteenth-century evolutionary social theories; that is to say, in the wake of a certain relativization of historical time. The use of the plural — histories, societies, formations, conditions, causes, etc. — is one way of recognizing and marking these differential times of 'history', avoiding what some theorists have called 'homogeneous time' (Benjamin, 1970; Anderson, 1986).

Closely related to this idea of a single historical time-scale is the view that modernity is really *one* thing, towards which every society is inevitably moving, though at different rates of development. Some social scientists not only conceptualized history as one process, working to a unified time-scale, but saw it as unfolding according to some necessary law or logic towards a prescribed and inevitable end. This was true, not only of certain kinds of classical Marxist historical analysis but also of those theorists who, while not accepting the Marxist model, did assume some form of western-style modernity to be the inevitable destiny of all societies. This assumption of an inevitable progress along a single path of development may have made it easier to read the meaning of history, since — despite much evidence to the contrary — it seemed to give it direction and we knew in advance the end of the story. But it did not square very easily with the great diversity of actual forms of historical development. Critics now call this one-track view a 'teleological' conception of history — moving towards a preordained end or goal. Modern social theorists have become increasingly aware of the limitations of this position in all its variants. It seems more and more implausible to see history as unfolding according to one logic. Increasingly, different temporalities, different outcomes seem to be involved. Many events seem to follow no rational logic but to be more the contingent effects of unintended consequences — outcomes no one ever intended, which are contrary to, and often the direct opposite of, what seemed to be the dominant thrust of events. Of course, the processes of formation were not autonomous and separate from one another. There were connections between them — they were articulated with one another. But they weren't inevitably harnessed together, all moving or changing in tandem.

One major weakness of the teleological view of history is that it tended to assume that there is only one path of social development — the one

taken by western societies — and that this is a universal model which all societies must follow and which leads sooner or later, through a fixed series of stages to the same end. Thus, tribal society would inevitably lead to the nation-state, feudalism to capitalism, rural society to industrialization, and so on. In one version, this was called 'modernization theory', a perspective which became very popular in the 1950s particularly in the writings of Walter Rostow (Rostow, 1971). This formed the basis of much western policy in the Third World, which was directed at bringing into existence as rapidly as possible what modernization theorists identified as the necessary conditions for western-style development and growth. Modernization theory also assumed that there *was* one, principal motor propelling societies up this ladder of development — the economy. The laws of capitalist industrialism — capital accumulation, supply and demand, rapid industrialization, market forces — were the principal engines of growth. Paradoxically, though they took a very different view of the nature and consequences of capitalism, modernization theorists tended to agree with Marxists in attributing social development ultimately to one, principal cause: the economic. This belief that all societies could be laid out at different points along the same evolutionary scale (with, of course, the West at the top!) was a very Enlightenment conception and one can see why many non-European societies now regard both these versions as very Euro-centric stories.

Few would now deny the link between capitalism and modernity. But in general this book breaks with this kind of one-track modernization theory and with the economic reductionism which was a key feature of it. In general, it adopts a more multi-causal explanation of how modern development in Western Europe occurred. It notes that few modern societies are or even look the same. Think of the US, the UK, France and Japan. Each took a radically different path to modernity. In each, that evolution depended on, not one, but a number of determining conditions. In general, though economic organization is a massive, shaping historical force, the economy alone cannot function outside of specific social, political and cultural conditions, let alone produce sustainable development. Modern societies certainly display no singular logic of development. The formation processes combine, in each instance, in very different ways. Japan, for example, combines a fiercely modern, high-tech economy with a strikingly traditional culture. Dictatorship was as much the engine of industrialization in Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union as democracy. Force, violence and coercion have played as decisive a historical role in the evolution of capitalism as peaceful economic competition. One of the purposes of comparative analysis, which is a feature of this book, is to highlight differences as well as similarities, and thus to underline the necessity of a break with mono-causal or reductionist explanations of social development.

In fact, even the idea of a necessary forward movement or progressive impetus towards 'development' built into history may be open to question. Development has indeed become the goal of many societies.

But not all societies are in fact 'developing'. And the under-development of some appears to be systematically linked to the over-development of others. So the 'law' of historical development keeps missing its way or failing to deliver. Development itself turns out, on inspection, to be a highly contradictory phenomenon, a two-edged sword.

Many social theorists now see unevenness and difference as an even more powerful historical logic than evenness, similarity and uniformity. Gradually, therefore, a more plural conception of the historical process of formation has emerged in the social sciences. It lays more stress on varied paths to development, diverse outcomes, ideas of difference, unevenness, contradiction, contingency (rather than necessity), and so on. However, it should be noted that giving greater weight to contingency in the accounts of social development does not mean that history is simply the outcome of a series of purely random events. But it does imply that in history everything does not seamlessly unfold according to some internal logic or inevitable law.

These are contentious issues in social science, and the questions they raise are far from settled. The six chapters in this book, for instance, take different positions on these questions. But the critique briefly outlined above is now widely accepted. Contributors to this volume still hold to the view that there *are* processes of formation which have shaped western societies, that these can be identified, mapped and analysed, and that explanations for some of their directions can be provided. That is to say, the book remains committed to what may be described as a qualified version of the Enlightenment belief that social development is amenable to rational analysis and explanation. But unlike many earlier sociological accounts, which tended to privilege class as the 'master' category, it does not adopt a clear hierarchy or priority of causes, and is generally critical of economic reductionism, in which the economic base is assumed to be the determining force in history 'in the last instance', as Frederick Engels once put it. As one social theorist, the French philosopher Louis Althusser, remarked, the trouble is that 'the last instance never comes'. Instead, this book analyses different, interdependent 'organizational clusters' — the polity, the economy, the social and the cultural — whose 'original association in western Europe', as Perry Anderson puts it, 'was fortuitous' (Anderson, 1990, p.53). In general, its contributors adopt a weaker notion of formation and causality and a pluralization of key concepts, as we noted earlier.

We have suggested why the history of modern societies had no absolute beginning or predetermined goal. However, it is almost impossible to describe the process of formation without using the language of 'origins', 'development' and, at least implicitly, 'ends'. Organizing the account of the formation of modern societies as a 'story' seems to carry its own narrative logic. A story-line imposes a form on what may be otherwise a formless and chaotic series of events. Narrative gives a chapter a certain impetus, flow and coherence, moving it smoothly from a 'beginning' to 'the sense of an ending' (as all good stories do). This

imposes a certain order or meaning on events which they may have lacked at the time. Increasingly, historians and philosophers have been puzzling over this impact of language, narrative and the literary devices which we use when constructing accounts, on the content and logic of an argument (White, 1987; Derrida, 1981). Some 'deconstructive' philosophers, for example, go so far as to argue that the persuasiveness of philosophical argument often depends more on its rhetorical form and its metaphors, than its rational logic. And they point to the fact that, in addition to imposing one meaning on events, narrative lends an account a certain unchallengeable authority or 'truth'.

Contributors to this volume have tried to build up the accounts they offer on the basis of a careful sifting of evidence and arguments which make their underlying theoretical assumptions clear. Nevertheless, you may also notice the impact of a greater reflexivity and self-consciousness about language, writing, and the forms which explanations take in the way the chapters in this book are written. Authors are constantly aware that it is *they* who impose a shape on events; that all accounts, however carefully tested and supported, are in the end 'authored'. All social science explanations reflect to some degree the point of view of the author who is trying to make sense of things. They do not carry the impersonal guarantee of inevitability and truth. Consequently, arguments and positions are advanced here in a more tentative and provisional way. It is more a choice between convincing accounts, which deal persuasively with all the evidence, even the part which does not fit the theory, than a simple choice between 'right' and 'wrong' explanations. Readers should recognize that arguments advanced in the book are open to debate, not variants of the Authorized Version.

Of course, being sensitive to language, meaning and the effect of narrative does not imply that social science simply produces a series of 'good stories', none better than the other. This would be an extreme form of relativism which would undermine the whole project of social science. There are criteria of assessment which help us to judge between the relative weight and explanatory power of different accounts. Most social analysts are still committed to providing systematic, rigorous, coherent, comprehensive, conceptually clear, well-evidenced accounts, which makes their underlying theoretical structure and value assumptions clear to readers, and thus accessible to argument and criticism. But the greater degree of awareness of one's own practices of producing meaning, of writing, even while doing it, means that we cannot deny the ultimately interpretive character of the social science enterprise.

This greater reflexivity — the attention to language, and the plural character of 'meanings' — is not, of course, entirely novel. Many earlier traditions which have influenced social science practice have raised similar issues — for example, linguistic philosophy, hermeneutics, phenomenology, interpretive sociology — though they pointed to different philosophical conclusions. However, the return of these issues

to the centre of social theory in recent years reflects what some social theorists now call the 'discursive turn' in social theory (Norris, 1983; Young, 1990). This implies a new — or renewed — awareness in theory and analysis of the importance of language (discourse) and how it is used (what is sometimes called 'discursive practice') to produce meaning. Meaning is recognized to be *contextual* — dependent upon specific historical contexts, rather than valid for all time. You will find this 'discursive turn' reflected, to different degrees, in this book and the other books in the series. The 'discursive turn' in modern philosophy is more fully debated in Gregor McLennan's final chapter in the last book in the series, *Modernity and Its Futures*.

The 'discursive turn' affects not only how some chapters in the volume are written but what they are about. The processes of economic, political and social development seem to have a clear, objective, material character. They altered material and social organization in the 'real world' — how people actually behaved — in ways which can be clearly identified and described. But cultural processes are rather different. They deal with less tangible things — meanings, values, symbols, ideas, knowledge, language, ideology: what cultural theorists call the symbolic dimensions of social life. Hitherto (and not only in Marxist types of analysis), these have been accorded a somewhat secondary status in the explanatory hierarchy of the social sciences. The cultural or ideological dimensions of social life were considered by some to be 'superstructural', dependent on and merely reflecting the primary status of the material base.

This book gives much greater prominence and weight to cultural and symbolic processes in the formation of modern societies. Chapters 1, 5 and 6 all deal directly with broadly cultural aspects. More significantly, culture is accorded a higher explanatory status than is customary. It is considered to be, not reflective of, but *constitutive* in the formation of the modern world: as constitutive as economic, political or social processes of change. What is more, economic, political and social processes do not operate outside of cultural and ideological conditions. The distinction between 'material' and 'ideational' factors in sociological analysis is thus considerably weakened, if not invalidated altogether. Language is seen to be 'material' because it is the result of social practice and has real effects in shaping and regulating social behaviour. Similarly, material processes — like the economy or politics — depend on 'meaning' for their effects and have cultural or ideological conditions of existence. The modern market economy, for example, requires new conceptions of economic life, a new economic discourse, as well as new organizational forms. It may not be helpful to draw hard and fast distinctions between these two aspects of social development — the material and the discursive.

Max Weber argued that social practices are always 'meaningful practices' and that this is what distinguishes them from mere biological reflexes, like an involuntary jerk following a tap on the knee. What Weber meant was not that practices have only one, true meaning, but

that all social practices are embedded in meaning and are in that sense cultural. In order to conduct a social practice, human beings must give it a certain meaning, have a conception of it, be able to think meaningfully about it. Marx (to many people's surprise) said something rather similar when he observed that 'the worst of architects is better than the best of bees'. What he meant was that bees build hives by instinct whereas even the worst architects are obliged to use a conceptual model of the buildings they are constructing. The production of social meanings is therefore a necessary condition for the functioning of all social practices. And since meanings cannot be fixed but constantly change and are always contested, an account of the discursive conditions of social practices must form part of the sociological explanation of how they work. This explains why, in general, *Formations of Modernity* gives greater weight to the discursive aspect of social processes than is conventional.

Nothing demonstrates better the importance of social meanings than the word which both features in the title of the book and occurs regularly throughout its argument: the term, 'modern'. Is it as innocently descriptive a concept as it seems, or is it more 'loaded'? Raymond Williams argues that the word 'modern' first appeared in English in the sixteenth century, referring to the argument between two schools of thought — the Ancients and the Moderns (a long-running dispute between those following classical literary models and those wanting to up-date them). 'The majority of pre-nineteenth century uses', he notes, 'were unfavourable'. Claiming things to be 'modern' — up-to-date, breaking with tradition — was, on the whole, held to be a bad thing, a dangerous idea, which required justification. It is only in the nineteenth century and 'very markedly in the twentieth century' that there is a strong movement the other way, 'until "modern" becomes virtually equivalent to "improved"' (Williams, 1976, p.174).

This suggests that the discourse of 'the modern', which we slip into without thinking, has never been purely descriptive, but has a more contested discursive history. Historians sometimes call the period of European history which begins in the late fifteenth century the 'early modern' period. They are using the term to mark the break with the old, the collapse of older structures, models, ways of life and the rise of new conceptions, new structures. As Harold Laski wrote:

By 1600 we may say definitely that men [sic] are living and working in a new moral world. ... There is a new social discipline which finds its sanctions independently of the religious ideal. There is a self-sufficient state. There is an intellectual temper aware ... that a limitation to the right of speculation is also a limitation to the right to material power. There is a new physical world, both in the geographical sense and the ideological. The content of experience being new also, new postulates are needed for its interpretation. Their character is already defined in the realm of social theory no less than in those of science and

philosophy. This content is material and of this world, instead of being spiritual and of the next. It is expansive, utilitarian, self-confident. It sets before itself the ideal of power over nature for the sake of the ease and comfort this power will confer. In its essence, it is the outlook of a new class which, given authority, is convinced that it can remould more adequately than in the past, the destinies of man.

(Laski, 1962, pp.57–8)

This is the moment of 'the modern', albeit in its very early stages. This book begins with this moment and what follows from it. But, as we noted, 'modernity' has a long and complex history. Each succeeding age — the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the nineteenth century (the age of revolutions), the twentieth century — has a sense of itself as representing the culminating point of history, and each has tried to clinch this capture of history by claiming the epithet 'modern' for itself. Yet in each age the claim has proved illusory. Each age succumbed to the fantasy that *it* was the last word in advanced living, in material development, in knowledge and enlightenment. Each time that 'modern' was superseded by something even more up to date! The whole idea of modernity received an enormous impetus towards the end of the nineteenth century, when industrialization was rapidly transforming social and economic life, not only in Western Europe but elsewhere, and the globalization of the world economy and of western ways of life rapidly reshaped world history. This is the period of the new avant-garde intellectual and artistic movements in the arts, literature, architecture, science and philosophy, sometimes called 'Modernism', which aggressively embraced 'the new' — novelty for its own sake — and revelled in challenging and overthrowing the old forms, traditions, theories, institutions and authorities.

Today, 'post-modernism' is challenging the old 'modernisms'. The closure of history keeps advancing into the future. It sometimes seems that what is quintessentially 'modern' is not so much any one period or any particular form of social organization so much as the fact that a society becomes seized with and pervaded by this idea of ceaseless development, progress and dynamic change; by the restless forward movement of time and history; by what some theorists call the compression of time and space (Giddens, 1984; Harvey, 1989). Essential to the idea of modernity is the belief that everything is destined to be speeded up, dissolved, displaced, transformed, reshaped. It is the shift — materially and culturally — into this new conception of social life which is the real transition to modernity. Marx caught this spirit of modernity in his prophetic epigram — 'All that is solid melts into air'.

However, this idea of 'the modern' as a roller coaster of change and progress contains a paradox. At the very moment when 'the modern' comes into its own, its ambiguities also become evident. Modernity becomes more troubled the more heroic, unstoppable and Promethean it seems. The more it assumes itself to be the summit of human

achievement, the more its dark side appears. The pollution of the environment and wastage of the earth's resources turns out to be the reverse side of 'development'. As many recent writers have noted, the Holocaust, which ravaged European Jewry, was perpetrated by a society which regarded itself as the summit of civilization and culture. The troubled thought surfaces that modernity's triumphs and successes are rooted, not simply in progress and enlightenment, but also in violence, oppression and exclusion, in the archaic, the violent, the untransformed, the repressed aspects of social life. Its restlessness — a key feature of the modern experience — becomes increasingly unsettling. Time and change, which propel it forward, threaten to engulf it. It is little wonder that modern societies are increasingly haunted by what Bryan Turner calls a pervasive nostalgia for past times — for lost community, for the 'good old days': always day-before-yesterday, always just over the horizon in an ever-receding image (Turner, 1990). The logic of modernity turns out to be a deeply contradictory logic — both constructive and destructive: its victims are as numerous as its beneficiaries. This Janus-face of modernity was inscribed in its earliest moments, and many of its subsequent twists and turns are laid out for inspection and analysis in this first volume of the modern story.

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