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Utopia or an Iron Cage?

Marx, Weber, Nietzsche, and the Future of Modernity

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Introduction

As complex entities, societies are comprised of the structures and institutions that shape and are shaped by the contextual values, traditions, norms, and practices, all of which give individuals within the society a sense of purpose, meaning, and identity. In the Western world over the past few hundred years, societies have generally taken shape in what is known as modernity. Just as is the case with all major societal formations, the modern society has many elements and characteristics that some experience in a positive light, while others look upon it negatively and others with indifference. Regardless of how one interprets it or is affected by it, modernity has more or less reached a crisis point in the last century, particularly within the last 50 years. Some argue that modernity is already over and we have now entered into the postmodern era. Nonetheless, however interpreted, modernity still greatly impacts and shapes the lives of individuals that live within it, and for that reason it is important to analyze the social phenomena that occur in modern society. It is an unavoidably important and vital question for society and social theorists to ask about the future of the modern society and its implications for those that live within it. This paper attempts to address some of the important overarching questions about the nature of modernity and the vision of its future for modern individuals.

This paper will first begin by attempting to generally define modernity and some of its core characteristics and the way they manifest in modern social reality. From there, it will present the perspectives of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Friedrich Nietzsche as general paradigm models for understanding and critiquing modernity. Then it will discuss general trends that have occurred and are continuing to occur within modern society and the manner in which it affects individuals. Next, the paper will present the three theorists' visions of the future for modernity. After evaluating those visions, the paper will describe possible alternatives for the future of modernity outside of those three theorists' perspectives. Having done that, the paper will conclude with a synthesis of all the ideas about modernity that have been presented and will offer a broader framework for envisioning the future of modernity.

Defining Modernity

As many of the most influential great social thinkers have shown through their extensive analyses and discourses, modernity is a vastly complex, general subject matter with various complex interworking facets, characteristics, and historical manifestations. For that reason, it is incredibly difficult to come to a single definition or conception on modernity without raising (necessary) objections from others in the field. Nonetheless, in order to embark on an investigation and discourse about the nature and future of modernity, it is necessary to have some general definition of it and its characteristics. As a result, I will draw on *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* for its general definitions of modernity and related concepts. It defines modernity as follows:

Modernity is distinguished on economic, political social and cultural grounds. For example, modern societies typically have industrial, capitalist economies, democratic political organization and a social structure founded on a division into social classes. There is less agreement on cultural features, which are said to include a tendency to the fragmentation of experience, a commodification and rationalization of all aspects of life, and a speeding up of the pace of daily life. Modernity has required new systems of individual surveillance, discipline and control. It has emphasized regularity and measurement in everyday life. The values of modernity include activism, universalism, and affective neutrality.¹

From this definition, it appears that modern societies can generally be distinguished by the existence of industrial capitalism, democracy, and social class structure. Rationalization of production, society, and individual life is apparently another core element that guides and shapes modern life. Industrialization of society appears to be both a cause and an effect of rationalization from this perspective. *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* distinguishes the main characteristics of an industrial society as:

The defining characteristics of an industrial society are: (1) the creation of the cohesive nation states organized around a common language and culture; (2) the commercialization of production and the disappearance of a subsistence economy; (3) the dominance of machine-production and the organization of production in the factory; (4) the decline of the proportion of the working

¹ Abercrombie et. al, 2010, p. 253

population engaged in agriculture; (5) the urbanization of society; (6) the growth of mass literacy; (7) the enfranchisement of the population and institutionalization of politics around mass parties; (8) the application of science to all spheres of life, especially industrial production, and the gradual rationalization of social life. Industrial society is frequently associated with mass society.²

From these two definitions, it appears that a general depiction of modern industrial society can be derived whereby industrial capitalism and democratic nation-states are coupled with a culture of scientific explanation, universalism, commercialized machine-enhanced production, bureaucratization, and rationalization of major societal institutions. This has the general tendency toward fragmented, commodified/commercialized, and “narrowed” life experience, yet is highly calculable, disciplined, and efficient.

Overall, it would appear that this general definition and understanding of modernity and its characteristics reveals the complex and often conflictual nature of modernity. Though many within the postmodern school of thought would argue that modernity has ended and has entered into the postmodern era, there are no doubts that many aspects of modernity are still driving forces in the shaping of many societal institutions and, subsequently, the daily experiences and realities of individuals in the Western world (and beyond).

With this general overarching definition for modernity, one can now begin to analyze the major social theorists’ views about it and, from there, ask questions about its future. This paper will analyze three major paradigms/approaches to understanding and critiquing modernity, as represented by the analyses of (1) Karl Marx, (2) Max Weber, and (3) Friedrich Nietzsche. Certainly there is overlap amongst these three theorists. Indeed, there are also many ideas that are not addressed about modernity by these three theorists alone. Nonetheless, this paper will utilize their ideas, as well as those of similar social theorists that fit within their general paradigms, to focus on a more critical analysis of modernity in order to best draw on its possible future manifestations in society and its implications. General movements in modern history leads this author to conclude that a

² Ibid, p. 197

critical approach is necessary in order to best analyze and portray the apparent dissolving nature of modernity (as exemplified by the movement towards postmodernism).

Major Paradigms of Modernity

Karl Marx

The first of these three major German social theorists, Karl Marx, is certainly a controversial topic in modern history (particularly in the US). To understand Marx, one must understand his general views of human nature. Though he may have been disgruntled by any general ideas of a generalizable human nature, it would appear that he viewed human beings as innately seeking a sense of meaning and self-fulfillment through creative, productive work: “Marx viewed the human individual as a creative agent striving toward self-fulfillment.”³ However, this search for self-fulfillment could only occur within the limitations of society: “For Marx, ‘freedom’ and ‘self-determination’ could be realized only within the confines of particular and historically variable types of social formation. To be free and to be self-determined is not to separate oneself from human society but to understand how the limits to one’s creative life are set by the limits of one’s participation in a collective endeavor.”⁴ Thus, it seems that generally Marx viewed human beings as needing to find a sense of meaning and purpose, and their participation in creative and productive work was a natural manifestation of this quest.

From this perspective of human nature, Marx embraced a materialist conception of history. As a student of Hegel, he agreed that human society was the result of human activity in history, and thus it had to be seriously accounted for in an analysis of the historical development of social reality. However, Marx took this idea further by claiming that not only do humans shape history by their actions and choices, but these actions that shape social reality are “the result of the human need to exercise technical

³ Ashley & Orenstein, 2005, p. 199.

⁴ Ibid, p. 200.

control over a variable natural environment.”⁵ Thus, according to Marx, human history is nothing more than the struggle of different groups in society to own, control, and dominate the scarce resources of the means of production. In *The German Ideology*, Marx summarizes this idea when he writes:

In direct contrast to German Philosophy, which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process.⁶

It is from this idea that he puts forth the concept of the “economic superstructure” as the driving force in society. The capitalist economic superstructure is the core, inevitable characteristic of modern industrial society that shapes the historical reality of the struggle for the control and ownership of the means of production.

It is in this historical struggle that the modern capitalist system is viewed as the single most important element of modernity. While Marx was known as one of the most poignant, scathing critics of capitalism, he unequivocally recognized and even praised the unprecedented levels of production and efficiency that it was able to generate: “The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together.”⁷ Despite its incredibly productive nature, Marx claimed that capitalism is also innately exploitative, dehumanizing, and conflictual. It places at odds the bourgeoisie—the owners of the means of production (capital)—against the proletariat masses—the non-owning laborers. He expounds on how the bourgeoisie, as a means of securing control of the means of production, utilize their power and wealth to dominate all other spheres of life, particularly the political institutions. Thus inequality is inevitably large within a capitalist society, preventing the proletariat from obtaining control and power. V.I. Lenin

⁵ Ibid, p. 192.

⁶ Marx, 1972, p. 47; cited in Ashley & Orenstein, p. 193.

⁷ Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*; cited in *The Portable Karl Marx*, 1983, p. 209.

expanded on the increasing concentration of wealth and power into increasingly fewer elites in a detailed analysis of the tendency towards monopolization by corporations of the early 20th century in his book *Imperialism*⁸. According to Marx, the domination of the bourgeois class over the proletariat class is maintained by the use of hegemonic manipulation of the proletariat ideology to placate and control the masses into accepting the societal order and their position within it.

It is within this highly unequal and conflictual class struggle that Marx becomes concerned about the alienation of the proletariat. According to Marx, private property necessarily results in alienation. Marx elaborates on this idea of alienation when he writes,

...The object which labor produces—the product of labor—confronts it as an *alien being*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor embodied and made material in a thing; it is the *objectification* of labor. The realization of labor is its objectification. Within the political economy, this realization of labor appears as the *loss of reality* of the worker, objectification appears as the *loss of the object* and *bondage to it*; appropriation appears as *alienation*, as *externalization*.

The realization of labor appears as the loss of reality by the worker to such an extent that he loses reality to the point of starvation. Objectification appears as loss of the object to such an extent that the worker is robbed of the most essential objects, not only for life but also for work. Indeed, work itself becomes an object which he can obtain only with the greatest effort and with the most unpredictable interruptions. The appropriation of the object appears as alienation to such an extent that the more objects the worker produces the fewer he can own and the more he falls under the domination of his product, capital.⁹

This alienation of the worker from his/her production also manifests in alienation from the production process itself, from him/herself, and from others, culminating in its fullest expression with alienation of the worker from the non-worker (owner). As workers are

⁸ Lenin, 1939.

⁹ Marx, "The First Manuscript: 'Alienated Labour'; from the Economico-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844"; cited in *The Portable Karl Marx*, 1983, p. 133)

separated from the fruits of their labor, they become increasingly alienated from it and subsequently themselves the more they produce. There is a complete loss of creative work; the worker becomes nothing more than a replaceable and interchangeable cog in the production process.

This sense of alienation permeates into all spheres of the worker's life, leaving him/her bereft of a fulfilling sense of meaning, purpose, and identity. As historian Jerry Z. Muller summarizes in his book *The Mind and the Market*, "In his depiction of capitalism as alienation, Marx expressed a notion that many felt implicitly: that the satisfaction of individuals in modern society is sacrificed to forces over which they seem to have no control."¹⁰ This is particularly troubling for Marx because he felt that human nature would always seek to derive a sense of meaning, purpose, and self-fulfillment in one's work and other life pursuits. As a result, the modern individual becomes driven by private consumption as a source of meaning and identity in an alienating society:

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when it is directly eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., in short, utilized in some way. But private property itself only conceives these various forms of possession as means of life, and the life for which they serve as means is the life of private property--labor and creation of capital.

Thus all the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of all these senses, the sense of having. The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order to be able to give birth to all his inner wealth.¹¹

Private property becomes both the only means of meaning and identity for the modern proletariat, as well as the ultimate manifestation of his/her alienation. In fact, in the mid 20th century, Herbert Marcuse, while pondering as to what was preventing the proletariat revolution in the US, concluded that material consumption was the greatest force for

¹⁰ Muller, 2002, p. 167

¹¹ Marx, "The Third Manuscript: 'Private Property and Communism'; from the Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844"; cited in *The Portable Karl Marx*, 1983, p. 151

pacifying the alienated masses: “...Contemporary capitalism was pernicious because it *created* new needs and then *fulfilled* them, leaving individuals feeling happy and satisfied. The individual becomes a slave to his passions, but passions that are molded and directed by others who seek to profit from creating the needs for new commodities and inculcating them through the mass media, through advertising, and through the means of entertainment.”¹² Marcuse appears to expand Marx’s ideas into the 20th century, showing that capitalism is exploitative and domineering not only in the way that it creates endless insatiable desires, but also that it fulfills them, further placating the masses from becoming conscious of their alienated and exploited condition.

Thus, for Marx, the modern capitalist society created a life of alienation for the working masses for the benefit of the few elites. It is for this reason that Marx believed that it is the society—not the individual—that is responsible for the unnecessary suffering and human unhappiness that plagues modern society. It is only with the destruction of private property and, subsequently, the modern capitalist society that humans could be liberated from the alienation of modernity. And, as will be discussed later, the innate contradictions of the conflictual modern capitalist system, according to Marx, would be the cause of its demise.

Max Weber

While sharing many similarities to his fellow German predecessor, Weber’s ideas about modernity differed significantly both in substance and implications from Marx. Like Marx, Weber was greatly concerned with the alienation and dehumanization of life within the modern society. However, Weber emphasized rationalization and bureaucratization of the modern life as the primary source for alienation. Even though he agreed with many of Marx’s assertions about the symbiotic relationship between class relations and power in society, Weber did not think it was necessarily the root cause of the suffering and discontentment of modernity.

¹² Muller, p. 337

Weber believed that industrial capitalism is a core element of modernity. Like Marx, Weber praised capitalism's ability to produce and innovate at historically unprecedented rates: "Throughout his career, Weber insisted that capitalism was the most efficient economic system possible under modern conditions."¹³ The capitalist system has an innate desire to push for greater efficiency in order to maximize production output while minimizing input costs, thereby exploiting greater profits. Ironically, it is modern capitalism's greatest aspect—efficiency of production, organization, and innovation—that is also its most dehumanizing aspect as well. Weber called the movement towards greater efficiency of all processes and activities "rationalization".

Throughout his writings on modernity, Weber emphasized the theme of rationalization as the underlying organizing force of modern society. By rationalization, he was referring to "...the tendency to calculate as carefully as possible the most efficient means, and to implement them methodically in order to achieve control over nature, society, and the self."¹⁴ According to Weber, there are three major types of rationalism that are at the core of shaping the modern society: (1) scientific-technological rationalism, (2) metaphysical-ethical rationalism, and (3) methodical lifestyle rationalism. Scientific-technological rationalism "refers to the rise of science and technology."¹⁵ It is the application of modern scientific thought to analyzing and understanding the physical and social phenomena of the world in order to maximize its instrumental value. Metaphysical-ethical rationalism "refers to the rationalization of culture and the systematization of meaning."¹⁶ This is incredibly worrisome for Weber because of his concern about the loss of meaning and purpose for modern individuals. In regards to culture, "Weber believed that the purpose of human culture was to create a finite segment of meaning from the meaningless infinity of the world process."¹⁷ Thus with the rationalization of culture, the loss of meaning becomes increasingly unavoidable in modern society. Finally, methodical lifestyle rationalism is the idea that the daily lives of individuals in modern society is increasingly routinized and organized in order to be

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 240

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ Ashley & Orenstein, p. 246

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 232

most efficient with the use of time, energy, resources, etc. Overall, it is apparent that Weber thought rationalization penetrated into every sphere of reality for the modern individual.

The most obvious manifestation of rationalization, for Weber, is the modern bureaucracy. The *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* defines Weber's "ideal type" definition of bureaucracy as being comprised of the following characteristics:

A high degree of specialization and a clearly defined division of labour, with tasks distributed as official duties; a hierarchical structure of authority with clearly circumscribed areas of command and responsibility; the establishment of a formal body of rules to govern the operation of the organization; administration based on written documents; impersonal relationships between organizational members and with clients; recruitment of personnel on the basis of ability and technical knowledge; long-term employment; promotion on the basis of seniority or merit; a fixed salary; the separation of private and official income.¹⁸

Certainly many of these familiar characteristics of modern organizations can be argued as "good" qualities. For example, many would most likely prefer the stability of long-term employment and a fixed salary with space for earning promotions based on merit and/or seniority. Many may prefer having employment decisions be based on ability and knowledge rather than personal ties or discrimination based on a non-skills-related quality. However one may choose to evaluate the bureaucracy, the point at hand is that it is incredibly efficient, and, as a result, it prioritizes efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control above personal, sympathetic, eclectic needs of the workers and the customers.¹⁹

While in some instances it appears that rationalization may be desirable in order to maximize efficiency, Weber contends that rationalization inevitably results in the alienation of the life of modern individuals, which he referred to as the "problem of meaning". Rationalization of every sphere of life has resulted in a confusion of the means with the ends, reshaping actions towards being a means of maximizing efficiency for

¹⁸ Abercrombie et. al, p. 37

¹⁹ Ritzer, 2008

efficiency's sake, production for production's sake, consumption for consumption's sake, etc. This idea is similar to Simmel's concept of the "tragedy of culture", whereby "the division of labor and the increasing complexity of modern life meant that amid an explosion of cultural products the individual had to become more specialized and one-sided."²⁰ Furthermore, people become increasingly isolated from one another as the impersonal nature of rationalization penetrates into the daily lives of those in communities. This decline in community involvement and increase in individual isolation is well documented by Robert Putnam's work²¹.

In the search for mastery over the universe, "contemporary individuals now contemplate a universe that has become indifferent to humanity and devoid of meaning... Modern individuals...view the cosmos as a resource to be manipulated and used for instrumental gain."²² No longer are people able to conceive of a deeper, mysterious meaning from the cosmos, but rather they can only see it from a highly rationalized, scientific perspective of causal explanation. This results in what Weber calls the "disenchantment of the world". In a similar fashion to Marx, Weber points out the confusion of the means and the ends as a component of life in modern society, and how it affects the search for purpose and meaning by modern individuals:

Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs. This reversal of what we should call the natural relationship, so irrational from a naïve point of view, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all peoples not under capitalistic influence.²³

Thus, for Weber, modernity is inevitably dehumanizing due to the permeation of rationalism into every sphere of life of the individual in society. Just as modern individuals become increasingly specialized and narrow-minded by the rationalized bureaucratic organization of work, so too does every other sphere of the life of modern

²⁰ Muller, p. 250

²¹ Putnam, "Blowing Alone: America's Declining Social Capital", 1995

²² Ashley & Orenstein, p. 246

²³ Weber, 1930, p. 53

individuals. Contemporary examples of this idea comprise the entirety of George Ritzer's work in *The McDonaldization of Society*.²⁴ The efficiency of production and innovation in modern capitalist society inevitably results in the dehumanizing, rationalized understanding and experience of life.

Friedrich Nietzsche

In many ways, Nietzsche's analysis of modernity is very similar to that of Weber. This is due to the fact that Weber was deeply influenced by Nietzsche's writings and ideas. In other ways, however, Nietzsche and Weber are in direct opposition. For example, Nietzsche rejected the study of sociology, claiming, "The only social structure he ever recognized (and so defined) was the *body*."²⁵ Yet, in other ways he clearly incorporated social issues into his work, such as his idea that "...knowledge is a cloak much favored by power"²⁶; thus recognizing that what is determined as knowledge in society is the result of power.

For this reason, Nietzsche believed there is no single morality in society, only moralities; those of the most powerful are those that will prevail. He distinguished between the "master" morality and the "slave" morality, whereby the "mastery" morality is characterized by the "lust to rule", and the "slave" morality is characterized by the "morality of utility" for him/herself and against the powerful. Nietzsche believed that self-mastery is the most noble and important accomplishment and life pursuit of an individual. Religion, according to Nietzsche, prevents the individual from true self-mastery through the use of guilt. However, modern society and its democracy and socialism teaches individuals the "herd morality" which is the rejection of anything personal.

It is from here that Nietzsche claimed that "...modernity was creating human beings without deep foundations, without public convictions, and without lasting

²⁴ Ritzer, 2008

²⁵ Ashley & Orenstein, p. 437

²⁶ Ibid

commitments.”²⁷ Modernity, according to Nietzsche, inevitably leads to the loss of the individual. He claims that the sovereign individual is destroyed by an “ethic of utility”. He blamed this on the rapid pace of the increasingly commodified and commercialized life in the modern capitalist society, which he described as, “One is now ashamed of repose: even long reflection almost causes remorse of conscience. Thinking is done with a stop-watch, as dining is done with the eyes fixed on the financial newspaper; we live like men who are continually ‘afraid of letting opportunities slip.’ ‘Better do anything whatever, than nothing’—this principle also is a noose with which all culture and all higher taste may be strangled.”²⁸ In this modern, highly rationalized and calculated life, there is no space or priority given to personal reflection from which one can draw meaning. Life becomes merely a large checklist of activities and accomplishments that must be done in the quickest manner possible.

Nietzsche then extends his critique of modernity by rejecting the modern scientific framework entirely. He claims that the modern scientific worldview is able to explain all previously unknown social, physical, biological, chemical, psychological, etc., phenomena via the scientific method. However, he points out that this is an empty endeavor that will leave the modern person with no greater sense of meaning or mystery in life. Because modern people created a framework whereby one can define, test, analyze and understand anything by the principles that it set forth, one will eventually find him/herself having a scientific explanation for everything and begin to ask what the deeper purpose is of it all. Nietzsche claims the only deeper underlying purpose will naturally trace back to the same people that created the framework, rules, and principles from which the explanation is derived. For this reason, Nietzsche believed that the triumph of the modern scientific worldview represents an abyss of meaning; it is a “hiding place for every type of discontent, disbelief, gnawing worm...[and] bad conscience—it is the unrest of the *lack* of ideals, the suffering from the *lack* of any great love, the discontent in the face of involuntary contentment.”²⁹ He believed that modern

²⁷ Ibid, p. 438

²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 329; cited in Ashley & Orenstein, p. 443

²⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 147; cited in Ashley & Orenstein, p. 448

science is the “great destroyer of ideals, values, and purpose.”³⁰ It inevitably would result in nihilism, which would be humanity’s ultimate “destruction, ruin, and overthrow”.

Following the idea of the nihilistic tendency of modernity, Nietzsche claimed that the “death of the Christian God” is the “cardinal event” of modernity. By using modern science to explain away all social phenomena, modern people no longer find a need for God or any other deity to explain the cosmos and give meaning to life. This is most deeply expressed in his famous parable of the madman in the marketplace:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"---As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?---Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him---you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

"How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us---for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant

³⁰ Ashley & Orenstein, p. 448

stars---and yet they have done it themselves.³¹

In Nietzsche's shocking parable, modern people are now stripped of all reference points of meaning and purpose. The loss of moral foundations leads to a loss of purpose and, ultimately, a state of 'nothingness': "He who no longer finds what is great in God, will find it nowhere. He must either deny it or create it"³² It is the fate of the modern individual that he/she must choose to either embrace the atheistic "nothingness" of life or create gods of his/her own. This is especially disturbing for the ideas of Emile Durkheim who believed that society needs God or religion for creating a sense of order and purpose, as well as providing a central reference point for values and morals. Overall, Nietzsche's depiction of modernity is similarly pessimistic and fatalistic like Weber. It is no surprise that many credit his ideas as the origins of the postmodern movement.

Capitalism's Domination of Modern Life & the Crisis of Modernity

In many ways, Marx, Weber, and Nietzsche all point to the way in which modern values of efficiency, growth, and innovation have created a life of that is increasingly void of meaning. Marx, more so than Weber and Nietzsche, points to the modern capitalist market system as the embodiment of such dehumanizing elements. Before presenting the three theorists' visions and predictions about the future of modernity, the author will present some observations from the three theorists' descriptions about the manner in which the highly rationalized modern capitalist system and its social and political counterparts have come to dominate other spheres of life in modern society.

The dehumanizing and commodifying nature of the modern capitalist system cannot be regulated. As Weber described, its very nature will lead it to attempt to penetrate into every sphere of life within a particular society. Take the US as an example. It began by using the market as a means of material exchange, and it was generally limited to the bounds of the economic sphere. However, as society and laws evolved, it married the unlimited potential of scientific technologic advances—and its shallow

³¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882, p. 125; cited in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 1976, p. 95-6

³² Ashley & Orenstein, p. 449

promise of being able to solve all human problems and needs, as described by Nietzsche—with the insatiable desire for material consumption. As this occurred, the need for cheaper and cheaper inputs of production resulted in increasingly meaningless and purposeless alienated labor force, which led the majority of the working populace to lose a sense of identity except outside of its consumer status—as Marx predicted. The loss of purpose and meaning was left only to be filled by consumption. This is the inevitable penetration of the capitalist system into every sphere of humanity, resulting in the ability to purchase any type of product or service, be it food, gasoline, political influence, love, sex, etc. When everything can be made into a commodity and given a market value, it can be bought and sold, and thus loses its human value. This is the course of the modern rationalized capitalist system in society.

Furthermore, it creates its own ideology to justify any market pursuit as justice inasmuch as there is a demand and supply. Therefore, it builds the value systems in society that support its takeover. Any regulations against the market penetrating into certain spheres of life have historically resulted typically in the creation of an illegal sub-market or “black market” for the product/service. The stronger the restrictions and sanctions against the ability to legally obtain the product/service, the higher the demand and price for said product. The illegal drug market in the US is an example of this tendency, especially in the massive complex division of labor for drug cartels in Latin America. As a result, where there is a high demand for a high-priced good/service, there will always be adequate supply regardless of the morality of it. Historically, the regulated product becomes too profitable for the society and its legislative body to ignore it any longer, and it typically legalizes the product and justifies it as an attempt to control it more effectively. This is often the logic behind the popular discussion of potentially legalizing drugs in the US in order to diminish the corrupting power of drug cartels. Regardless of the intentions, the modern, rationalized capitalist system has succeeded in penetrating into and co-opting another sphere of human life. It seems that as one peruses through modern history, this has been a continuous pattern of modern society. Furthermore, a new ideology evolves to justify the opening up of all markets by the destruction of regulation—in this case, libertarianism.

If this is the case, there is no aspect of humanity that will not be made into a commodity for market exchange. Thus human beings will increasingly become essentially prostituted by the market system in every facet of life. For example, there is already a well-organized international division of labor for the scientific engineering of in vitro babies, whereby the surrogate mother becomes nothing more than a baby-producing machine or input cost along the production line of children that are sold in the market to the highest bidder.³³ If one of the most deeply human processes—giving birth—is made into a bureaucratically organized production process for the market economy, what is safe from becoming commodified? Is there any aspect of human life that is immune? If efficiency and profit are the dominant motivations for modern life, are there any ethical bounds for which the modern rationalized capitalist market system cannot co-opt? Even religion has far too often become co-opted by market values, as the examples of the “drive-through churches” and the massive growth in mega-churches have shown. The family also has been co-opted and marketed by reality television shows whereby every minute of a family’s life is monitored by cameras for the general public to watch and exploit.

As it goes along this destructively dehumanizing process, it exponentially increases the necessary level of use and exploitation of the earth’s limited and scarce resources, without any regard to sustainability for future generations. This, of course, is the result of the ideology that justifies short-term use for personal gain without any reflection or care for long-term issues or sustainability; it is about satisfying the immediate desires of the individual today and now in the most efficient manner. Furthermore, it creates (intentionally or not) systemic poverty for the increasing masses of the world’s population. All the while its beneficiaries will justify such negative outcomes by claiming that even though inequality has increased, the overall absolute welfare of individuals has increased as well. Ironically, it is always those that have benefited the most that define the metrics for welfare, never asking the poor themselves if they perceive themselves as better off according to their own standards. But this should be of no surprise since the modern rationalized social organization structure requires a

³³ “Google Baby”, 1999, HBO Documentary

well-established hierarchy of power in order to maximize efficiency through competition and bureaucratization. Increasingly, as Marx and Lenin eloquently pointed out, the concentration of capital will continue to aggrandize into fewer and fewer hands, leaving an increasing majority of people to the mercy and dictates of the few. This will certainly be marked by increasingly dehumanized labor under the efficient auspices of the bureaucratic mode of production, which permeates into other spheres of their lives. As so many social thinkers have correctly pointed out, this results in the confusion of the ends and the means of production, leaving one in an endless cycle without any clear goal or outcome. Just as the creativity of production of the worker is stunted, they find themselves progressively more exploited and pressed by their alienating occupations. It should not be out of the question, following this logic, that the modern education system would begin to reflect this framework by emphasizing technical over eclectic thought, specialized/applied rather than liberal arts, temporal rather than historical perspective.

The greatest question that must be asked is whether or not society wants a rationalized market and social system that is able to take every aspect of what it means to be human and turn it into a marketable commodity. If not, the question then becomes ‘are we too far immersed in this rationalized modern system to go back?’ Is there even a realistic “back” that society would want to return to? Where else can modern society go?

Purpose and Meaning Derived from the Experience and Process

The truly tragic aspect of the modern rationalized life is that it naturally seeks to “arrive” at some end destination whereby people have fulfillment or purpose or success. However, modern society has a value-system driven by the modern, rationalized capitalist market within which there is no clear sense of when one has “enough”. As a result, modern individuals continue to search for the ultimate solution that will bring them to the utopian point of “arrival” where their fullest sense of humanity is culminated. Unfortunately, the great misconception of the modern rationalized life is that there is no final point of arrival, nirvana, or end-all goal. Humanity, in its very essence, derives meaning and purpose from the process and the experience of life.

In pre-modern societies, the purchase of a good—for example, a pair of shoes—had a deeper sense of meaning than it has today, generally speaking. For example, one would have to go to the local shoemaker who they probably personally knew and with which may have shared a friendship. The shoemaker would then have to take personalized measurements of the person's feet, ask about the person's preferences in regards to style, material, purpose, etc., and then bargain a price. From there the buyer would have to wait some time before receiving the shoes, as it took time for the shoemaker to personally make a shoe. After purchasing materials for the shoe from what was most likely a local seller, the shoemaker would then embark on the tedious, detailed, and skilled process of creating personalized shoes from scratch. Certainly there was a deeper sense of meaning and empowerment in the shoemakers work in that he/she was able to use his/her creative and highly trained skills to create a pair of shoes for an acquaintance, if not a friend. After much tedious and detailed work was completed, the buyer would then be informed about the completed status of his shoes and would then arrive to pick them up. Not only do the new shoes provide what is essentially the same level of utility as shoes provide in modern society, but they also provided a greater meaning that was derived from a personalized pair of shoes that were made solely for that individual, by being made by a highly skilled local community member, and from the process of waiting in anticipation for the arrival of the shoes. Indeed, the shoemaker would have most likely received a sense of accomplishment and purpose as he/she saw the purchaser walk around town in the shoes that he/she created.

Though this example is greatly generalized and most likely highly romanticized, there are important elements of it that contrast the purchase of shoes in modern society. When one purchases a pair of shoes in the highly rationalized modern capitalist society, most likely the person goes to a large chain retail shoe store (i.e. Footlocker, Sports Authority, Payless Shoes, DSW, etc.) and most likely does not know anybody who works there or who owns it, and the buyer is most likely not effected by this reality or even consciously aware of it. The buyer then finds the shoe that best matches its purpose (i.e. casual, cross-trainer, basketball, etc.) by searching the highly organized aisles of shoes in order to find his/her size, which is most likely numerically organized. The buyer most

likely does not know who made the shoes (beyond the brand name), where they were made, or how they were made, nor is the buyer aware of where the materials came from. If the buyer's feet do not fit within the rationally standardized sizing units available, he/she will merely have to suffer having either a shoe that is slightly too large or small. The buyer then brings the shoes to the checkout counter where they minimally interact with the clerk in accordance with society's norms of politeness and small talk. The buyer will most likely then pay with a credit card, sign a receipt indicating that they are, in fact, who they say they are, and then leave the store. There is no deeper meaning for either the buyer of the shoe or the people who mass-produced them in a factory somewhere in the world, or, for that matter, for the store clerk. All that is left is the mere utility value of the shoe for the individual, and possibly the social value of having a currently "fashionable" shoe style. There is a clear absence of meaning in this rationalized modern process.

The modern framework has sought solutions and final destinations, when in reality the human experience is about the cumulative process. This is a threat to the modern capitalist market system and its goal, which prioritizes short-term, immediate gratification above long-term, lifelong thought, reflection, introspection, and growth. Immediacy replaces gradualness; the solution replaces the process; the commodity value replaces the human value of the experience. In short, modern humanity is subjected to an increasingly narrowed, dehumanized, impersonal, individualistic, self-sufficient, and tragically inconclusive and thus ultimately meaningless, purposeless, and identity-less life, all belied by the unfulfillable promise of modernity.

The Future of Modernity?

Having analyzed the three major social theorists' understanding of modernity and then looked at general movements and impacts of the crisis of modern capitalism on society at the local, national, and global level, this paper will now present each of the three theorists' predictions about the future of modernity and briefly evaluate them. After reviewing and evaluating the three theorists' predictions about modernity, the paper will then present and evaluate other alternative visions for the future of modernity.

Marx's "Communist Utopia"

Despite the seemingly apparent irony, Marx's future vision of modernity is the most optimistic view for human society of the three theorists being discussed despite the fact that his is the only that involves the destruction of modern capitalism. Generally speaking, Marx predicted that the modern capitalist system's innate contradictions would lead to its own demise and be replaced by a proletariat-lead socialist society, eventually culminating in the full manifestation of the communist society. For the scope of this paper, a general description of Marx's vision, its meaning for human society, and the process of how to get there is necessary.

Marx, despite his abhorrence towards the alienating and exploitative nature of the capitalist system, had a future vision of society that is built off the accomplishments of modern capitalism. He maintained that capitalism's technological advances and innovations for increasing productivity and worker efficiency—though exploitative when used by the bourgeoisie—would be redirected by the proletariat for serving the common good. First, however, much had to happen in order to get to this point. According to Marx's ideas, as capitalism matures it will become increasingly unstable. Much of the economic reasoning behind this increased instability is based on the now debunked labor theory of value. For that reason, many economists simply ignore Marx as irrelevant, and brush him off to sociology, political science, and philosophy. However, there are other important economic insights to draw from his ideas that should not be ignored.

First, Marx believed that competition was one the underlying issues for capitalism. As companies compete, over time the nature of scarce resources will lead companies to both increase productivity and simultaneously reduce costs. As everyone becomes forced to invest in the latest technology to remain competitive, many of the smaller and even medium size companies will find they can no longer keep up with the expensive investments to stay ahead of the larger companies. As a result, the larger companies will aggrandize their market share from either purchasing the failing companies and merging it with their own, or by receiving the customers that left the

failing companies. This will become increasingly necessary in order for the large companies to maintain profitability, especially when the costs of producing rise. It thus becomes in the interests of the capitalists to create oligopolies and monopolies. In his book *Imperialism*, V. I. Lenin wrote, “The enormous growth of industry and the remarkably rapid process of concentration of production in ever-larger enterprises represents one of the most characteristic features of capitalism.”³⁴ Having presented data about the increased concentration of capital into fewer major corporations in the US from 1904 to 1909, Lenin claims,

Almost half the total production of all the enterprises of the country was carried on by a *hundredth part* of those enterprises! ... From this it can be seen that, at a certain stage of its development, concentration itself, as it were, leads right to monopoly; for a score or so of giant enterprises can easily arrive at an agreement, while on the other hand, the difficulty of competition and the tendency towards monopoly arise from the very dimensions of the enterprises. This transformation of competition into monopoly is one of the most important—if not the most important—phenomena of modern capitalist economy...³⁵

Lenin’s writings clearly support (and are influenced by) Marx’s idea of the increased tendency towards the concentration of capital into fewer and fewer hands.

The other mechanism that businesses use to decrease costs is to lower wages of employees and cut its workforce. This action is one of the most important for Marx: “For Marx, the fundamental contradiction of capitalism was dislocation between productive forces and the social relations of labor.”³⁶ As owners increase the productivity of each employee with more advanced technology, they still find they need to suppress the workers’ wages in order to remain competitive. This pushes the proletariat towards class-consciousness of their exploited and alienated state, which Marx believed was the one of the single-most crucial steps before the proletariat could organize against the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, as more workers are either unemployed or have decreases in wages, they are less and less able to purchase and consume at the same level as they were able to

³⁴ Lenin, p. 16

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 17

³⁶ Ashley & Orenstein, p. 207

before. In order for the businesses to produce economies of scale, they must mass-produce at large quantities in order to keep costs down. However, with increased production and decreased size of consumers, businesses will find themselves in a scenario of overproduction and oversaturation of the market. This will then force them to decrease costs to make up for their losses, inevitably resulting in further wage suppression and thus further encouraging proletariat class-consciousness.

Eventually this cycle should end with the proletariat, having reached a general awareness of their exploited and alienated condition within the capitalist system, organizing together as a common class that cannot benefit from the current capitalist system and overthrow the bourgeoisie. Immediately, Marx believed capitalism would be replaced with socialism. However, eventually the proletariat would replace it with full communism. In Marx's vision of the communist society, private property of the means of production would be replaced with public ownership. The workers would redirect production toward the common good, thus replacing the waste that came from competition to maximize profits. As a result, workers would not need to work as much, and instead could pursue other leisurely, enjoyable, meaningful activities:

For as soon as the division of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, as the spirit moves me, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, cowherd, or critic.³⁷

As the quote shows, in the communist society there will be dissolution of the division of labor so that workers can interchange roles to their desires. This would provide people with a sense of meaning in their work, and allow them to gain a sense of self-

³⁷ Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, vol. 3, p. 33; cited in Muller, p. 191

fulfillment in pursuing activities that utilize their creative skills in producing for the common good. Furthermore, all human necessities, such as health care, food, education, and housing would no longer be treated as commodities but rather as social goods provided for all equally. As Marx pointed out in the above quote, the general regulation of social production would involve moral rather than technical decision-making. Overall, communism would replace “economic criteria” of humanity with creative self-expression, and would prioritize moral argumentation above technical experience.

Max Weber's “Iron Cage”

Despite much congruence on many issues about modernity between Marx and Weber, they reach entirely different conclusions about its future. While Marx's vision of the future of modernity is one of communal good and enjoyment of life and work, Weber's is ominously pessimistic in comparison. Just as described earlier, Weber's greatest concern about modernity is the process of rationalization of every aspect of life and reality, thus dehumanizing it and leaving one with no true sense of purpose or meaning derived from daily activities and pursuits. For Weber, rationalization and bureaucratization of life is impossible to escape from; it is what he called the “iron cage” of modernity that individuals would find themselves trapped in. However, Weber's rejection of social evolutionary theories lead him to conclude, almost contradictorily, that the future is open and not deterministic or necessarily fatalistic. It is in this environment of conflicting ideas and an inevitable pessimism that his vision of modernity's future takes shape.

For Weber, rationalization is the most characteristic feature of modern society, as described earlier. Weber argued that capitalism is such a core component of modern society because of its interdependence on rationalized bureaucratic organization and rational scientific technological development. Capitalism cannot thrive on efficiency and innovation without rationalization of the division of labor and of scientific discovery and advanced technological use of resources. As the process of rationalization of culture and all other aspects of every life occur (metaphysical-ethical rationalism & methodical

lifestyle rationalism), there is an inevitable loss of meaning and identity that results. People are alienated by the impersonal relationships that characterize the modern rationalized life. In his book *Life in a Business-Oriented Society*, Richard Caston discusses the impersonal nature of bureaucracies and its effect on individuals when he writes, “Such impersonality facilitates a rational approach in working with people so that workers can be viewed and treated much as though they were merely replaceable cogs in a large social machine. The humanity and uniqueness of each worker is de-emphasized; much attention is focused instead on how individuals perform a limited range of tasks assigned to them. In essence, people become mere objects to be used in achieving some desired end...”³⁸ People feel a sense of alienation with their highly specialized and bureaucratized occupation. Even their recreation becomes rationalized, leaving nothing left for spontaneity. For example, Ritzer provides an example of the manner in which even recreation is rationalized in modern life when he writes,

Recreation can be thought of as a way to escape the rationalization of daily routines. However, over the years, these escape routes have themselves become rationalized, embodying the same principles as bureaucracies and fast-food restaurants. Among the many examples of the rationalization of recreation are cruises and cruise lines, chains of campgrounds, and package tours. Take, for example, a seven-day Mediterranean cruise. The ship sails around at least a part of the Mediterranean, stopping briefly at major tourist attractions and towns along the coast of, say, southern Europe. This route allows tourists to glimpse the maximum number of sites in the seven-day period. At particularly interesting or important sights, the ship docks for a few hours to allow individuals to embark, have a quick local meal, buy souvenirs, and take some pictures. Then a quick trip back to the ship, and it is off to the next locale. The cruise goes sleep during the overnight trips to these locales and take most of their meals on board the ship. They awaken the next morning, have a good breakfast, and there they are at the next site. It’s all very efficient.³⁹

³⁸ Caston, 1998, p. 119

³⁹ Ritzer, p. 27

Interestingly, Ritzer goes on to conclude about the example by claiming, “With the rationalization of even their recreational activities, people do come close to living in Weber’s iron cage of rationality.”⁴⁰ It is this loss of meaning that is taken from what used to be meaningful activities that leads to the iron cage of modernity.

This results in what Weber called the “problem of meaning”, which was discussed earlier. People’s loss of meaning, worth, purpose, and identity is inevitable in a rationalized system that prioritizes efficiency above humanity. A person merely becomes an interchangeable, standardized part or unit within the greater bureaucratic machine:

Imagine the consequences of that comprehensive bureaucratization and rationalization which already today we see approaching. Already now ... in all economic enterprises run on modern lines, rational calculation is manifest in every state. By it, the performance of each individual worker is mathematically measured, each man becomes a little cog in the machine and, aware of this, his one preoccupation is whether he can become a bigger cog.... It is apparent that today we are proceeding toward an evolution which resembles (the ancient kingdom of Egypt) in every detail, except that it is built on other foundations, on technically more perfect, more rationalized and therefore much more mechanized foundations. The problem which besets us now is not: how can this evolution be changed?—for that is impossible, but: what will come of it?⁴¹

The mysteries of the world, the cosmos, and the divine are greatly reduced to mere instrumentality. Rationalized modernity replaces substantive meaning with instrumental effectiveness. It results in what Weber called the “irrationality of rationality”, which can be summarized as the dehumanization and inefficiencies (i.e. highway traffic makes travel time slower than using side roads) that result in the pursuit of efficiency for efficiency’s sake. Unfortunately, despite many of its inefficient and dehumanizing outcomes, Weber argues that complete rationalization of life is unavoidable in the modern society, and individuals become trapped in the “iron cage” of modern rationalized life.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Cited in Coser, Lewis A., p. 231

Life within the “iron cage” is a manifestation of the discontent of meaningless structured life whereby the ends and means are blurred. Ritzer summarizes Weber’s concept of the iron cage when he writes, “...bureaucracies are cages in the sense that people are trapped in them, their basic humanity denied... He [Weber] anticipated a society of people locked into a series of rational structures, who could move only from one rational system to another—from rationalized educational institutions to rationalized workplaces, from rationalized recreational settings to rationalized homes. Society would eventually become nothing more than a seamless web of rationalized structures; there would be no escape.”⁴² Unlike Marx, Weber did not believe that there could be an effective political solution to the meaninglessness and alienation of life. In fact, he claimed that socialism would standardize and rationalize humans and things even more than capitalism. Instead, life in the rationalized capitalist society would become a battle for managerial positions in society in order to have some sense of autonomy from completely rationalized work. Life would become a “dictatorship of the official” within the bureaucratic organizational structure, leaving little or no space for individual expression or creativity.

However, Weber did point out that the only major sense of reprieve from the highly rationalized life of the iron cage is charismatic leadership. A charismatic authority is one that is based on “...an individual’s personal appeal... [The charismatic leader] will appear to have supernatural or superhuman power. The mission of such a leader is very often revolutionary.”⁴³ The charismatic leader will become increasingly desired by the masses and appear very attractive because he/she represents a clear break from rationalized-instrumental life. However, Weber also warned that charismatic leadership is often very difficult to maintain over a long period of time, often leaving society disappointed and still stuck in the iron cage of rationalized modernity. Thus, overall, Weber’s vision of the future is not like Marx’s “Garden of Eden” style utopia, but is instead an inescapable “iron cage” of rationalized life. However, it should be noted that Weber still contended that the future is always open, despite his ominous claims.

⁴² Ritzer, p. 27

⁴³ Ashley & Orenstein, p. 236

Nietzsche's "Nihilism"

In many ways, it is easy to see how Weber was influenced by Nietzsche's ideas about modernity, especially in reference to ideas about its future. As described earlier, Nietzsche was greatly concerned about the "loss of the individual" in modern society. He believed the modern life would be overwhelmingly meaningless and be a continual state of "nothingness". Much of this stems from his rejection of modern science in that it creates a framework that can causally explain all social and physical phenomena and can derive technology from this knowledge to solve life's pressing issues. It is from this process that Nietzsche so boldly claimed, "God is dead!" People no longer need God for provisions, solutions, or explanations. But this modern scientific framework also has its severe limitations that caused/causes much of the crisis of modernity. For Nietzsche, humans devised the rules, processes, and standards of evaluation for modern science. Thus, after all is explained scientifically, people will eventually seek for meaning beyond mere instrumental utility of resources, but they will only be able to trace its origins, purpose, and meaning back to the human devised scientific framework. There, thus, is no greater meaning that can be derived from it that is "beyond" humans, and they can no longer logically reconcile the mysterious divine nature of God with their scientific perspectives. As a result, modern people will have to face the difficult task of either creating new gods or denying any greater ultimate purpose or deity and face a future of meaninglessness.

The most unfortunate aspect of Nietzsche's vision for the future of modernity is that people can no longer go back. He ominously portrayed the "nothingness" and hopelessness of modern life when he wrote,

We have left the land and have gone aboard ship! We have broken down the bridge behind us—nay, more, the land behind us! Well, little ship look out! Besides thee is the ocean.... Times will come when thou wilt feel that it is infinite... Alas, if homesickness for the land should attack thee, as if there had

been *freedom* there—and there is no more “land” any longer!⁴⁴

Modern society cannot go back to any previous pre-modern era; the scientific perspective cannot be truly reconciled with such “primordial” ways of thinking. However, as modern society sails further out into the ocean, it realizes that there is no land in sight ahead to which it shall eventually reach. It is in this moment of panic of realizing that there is nothing ahead and no way to go back that modernity finds itself in crisis, and for the most part Nietzsche does not imagine modern society will get beyond it; it is infinite meaninglessness and nothingness; “nihilism stands at the door”.

Evaluation

It is difficult to evaluate each and reach a conclusion that only one view in particular is correct (if there even was a single definition of “correct” with which one could evaluate them). Nonetheless, each has important insights that can be generally evaluated and applied today.

In regards to Marx’s communist vision of the future, many in contemporary political and economic discussions simply disregard Marx’s communism based solely on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the liberalization of the Chinese economy. However, this is an unfortunate fallacy to make. Marx’s writings were largely a moral critique of capitalism, not merely an economic critique. While it was well established in the economic community that the labor theory of value, which Marx based much of his economic writings from in *Das Kapital*⁴⁵, is not a valid theory, Marx’s ideas and critiques about the innate contradictions of the capitalist system cannot be ignored:

Although it is integral to the Marxist model of exploitation, the labor theory of value is only tangentially related to the Marxist explanation of economic crisis. The crisis of capitalism is created *objectively* by the change in the ratio of constant to variable capital: the organic composition of capital. A subjective understanding of the exploitive nature of productive relations under capitalism

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, part II, p. 57; cited in Ashley & Orenstein, p. 448

⁴⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 1995

will lead to heightened class consciousness on the part of the proletariat. The *subjective* movement toward the overthrow of the capitalist system, however, is likely to occur only when the objective features of the system have become contradictory and untenable.⁴⁶

As the above quote describes, the implications about the contradictory exploitative nature of capitalism and how it will lead to a crisis and subsequent overthrow by the exploited is still valid without the labor theory of value. It is a social and moral critique of the system, not purely economic. To treat it as such is a mistake. Furthermore, Stalinist/Leninist and Maoist ideas should not be equated to Marx directly because they are not completely reflective of his ideas, though they may share many similarities and characteristics.

Furthermore, it is important to point out the ways that his predictions about capitalism have been more or less correct. For example, Marx appears to have been correct about the tendency towards greater inequality in the capitalist society, which is a well-documented tendency particularly in the US, especially with the decline of the middle class.⁴⁷ His claims about the rise of problems of alienation of labor and dehumanizing and exploitive work for the masses appear to be true, particularly with the rise of globalization.⁴⁸ Marx's claim that technology will continually replace humans appears to be the case with the rise of powerful computer technology and artificial intelligence. His prediction about social unrest and discontent appears to be valid, especially with the current "Occupy Wallstreet" protests that began in the US and have spread internationally; with the massive protests that have broken out all over Western Europe over austerity measures that are being taken to preserve the euro currency; and with the "Arab Spring" protests that have removed several leaders of Arab countries (however, it is difficult to say that the Arab Spring arose only because of economic discontentment). Marx appears to have correctly predicted capitalism's push to privatize and commodify all things, as exemplified by the international division of labor that has developed in the market for surrogate mothers and the outsourcing of pregnancy and

⁴⁶ Ashley & Orenstein, p. 207-8

⁴⁷ see Haskins & Sawhill, 2009

⁴⁸ see Wallerstein, 2007

infant adoption.⁴⁹ Finally, Marx appears to have been fairly correct about the penetration of elitists rule into political and economic life at the national and global levels, as the Western global debt crisis appears to be revealing the demise of the bourgeois façade to placate the masses.

So why, then, hasn't the proletariat revolution occurred in most advanced Western capitalist societies? While it appears that this may discredit Marx's predictions, it should be noted, though, that Marx did acknowledge that the capitalist class would be able to placate the masses over time, if not indefinitely. However, it does not appear that he could have possibly predicted the massive amount of government intervention in stabilizing the market that has occurred over the past century and its effects for maintaining the capitalist society. The legalization of unions helped to placate the exploited workers in the early 20th century. President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal" program, based on John Maynard Keynes's economic theory of short-run government investment in order to spur economic growth during recessions, helped to get the US (and global) economy out of the elongated Depression of the 1920s and 1930s and institute social safety net programs such as social security. The rise of social welfare programs continued with President Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty" in the 1960s. Nonetheless, Marx believed the communist takeover would occur eventually, and in most advanced capitalist nations, it has not.

Even though Marx appears to have somewhat correctly predicted many of the tendencies of modern capitalist societies, it does not appear sufficient enough to fully validate his communist utopia as the certain future of modernity. Despite its more hopeful view of the future, it appears that the process of rationalization of every aspect of modern life has prevented any true sense of organized consciousness amongst the exploited masses from occurring. For example, in a leaked Citigroup memo describing the state of increasing inequality in the capitalist world as a "plutonomy", they claim that the possible disruption would be democratic backlash against the system. However, they appear to not be too concerned about such an uprising against the capitalist system because "enough of the electorate believe they have a chance of becoming a Pluto-

⁴⁹ see HBO documentary "Google Baby", 2009

participant.”⁵⁰ Thus the middle class has essentially been brain washed by the hegemony of the upper class that they can one day become an elite as well, despite all data and evidence to the contrary. Furthermore, Marx’s communist hope for the future does not even pass his own critique against religion as being “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”⁵¹ In a way, the hope of the communist utopia becomes a pacifying element for the exploited worker in the same manner as religion, giving workers hope that there will one day be a brighter future for themselves where they rule over the elites. This has very similar overtones of the Christian eschatology that Marx so greatly critiqued and rebuked as pacification of the proletariat. Nonetheless, Marx’s moral critiques about the innate contradictions of the capitalist system are important for understanding many of the issues that modernity currently is and will continue to have to face.

In regards to Weber and Nietzsche, it seems more appropriate to evaluate their claims simultaneously due to the fact that they share so many similarities. Both greatly stress the loss of meaning and purpose of the life of modern individuals because of modern scientific rationality. Weber takes the idea of rationalization further and presents it in a much more technical manner. Nonetheless, both view such pervasive meaninglessness and disenchantment as an unavoidable and inescapable aspect of modern society. It is difficult to argue against this assertion completely while being honest about historical reality. As George Ritzer’s many examples of the permeation of rationalization (or what he calls “McDonaldization) in contemporary Western society reveals, the process is not slowing but is continuing to expand at exponentially faster rates. Not only is it growing within Western nations, but its also permeating at a global level with globalization. It appears to be too large and powerful to contain, limit, or even destroy at this point. With greater expansion of the meaningless and dehumanizing process of rationalization, Weber’s iron cage and Nietzsche’s proverbial floating ship seem to be fairly accurate depictions of modernity: inescapable nothingness.

⁵⁰ Kapfur, Macleod, Sing, 2005, p. 24

⁵¹ Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 1844; cited in *The Portable Karl Marx*, p. 115

Alternatives?

With such ominous conclusions about the future of modernity presented by the three theorists, are there other possible alternatives for the future of modernity? This section of the paper will present and briefly outline and analyze some possible alternatives. However, it should be noted that this list is far from exhaustive and the analysis is far from comprehensive and complete. Nonetheless, this overview should provide a greater understanding of possible alternatives to the previously described predictions for the future of modernity.

Postmodernism?

For many, postmodernism is not just a possible alternative; it is the current reality that has already replaced modernity. However, it appears that most major modern societal institutions are still predominately functioning in society, particularly in the West (i.e. rationalized mode of organization and labor). Thus, while there may have been a more defined break from modernity to postmodernism within academia, that alone does not suffice for explaining the realities of life within society which still greatly reflects modernity in many key manners.

To begin, it is important to distinguish between the two major overarching schools of thought within postmodernism before attempting to define and analyze postmodernism. These two schools of thought are (1) affirmative and (2) skeptical postmodernism (although most postmodernists would claim to not identify with either affirmative or skeptical postmodern thought, and would most likely not prefer to even identify themselves as postmodern at all). In her book *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences*, Pauline Marie Rosenau defines skeptical postmodernism when she writes, “The skeptical post-modernism, offering a pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment, argue that the post-modern age is one of fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, meaninglessness, a vagueness or even absence of moral parameters and societal chaos... They argue that the destructive character of modernity makes the post-modern age one

of ‘radical, unsurpassable uncertainty’, characterized by all that is grim, cruel, alienating, hopeless, tired, and ambiguous. In this period no social or political ‘project’ is worthy of commitment.”⁵² Skeptical postmodernism is most well known for its rejection of history, time, space, and truth, claiming that nothing is ever truly knowable or present or measurable. Affirmative postmodernism, on the other hand, is defined by Rosenau when she writes, “Although the affirmative post-modernists...agree with the skeptical post-modernists’ critique of modernity; they have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the post-modern age.”⁵³ Generally speaking, affirmative postmodernism emphasizes the process of social and political mechanisms, stressing the importance of critical history and political movements as struggle and resistance for the indigenous and the local against the bureaucratic imperialist. They tend to emphasize that morals, values, and truth are knowable and open for evaluation, but must be done within local contexts, stressing the importance of cultural relativism.

Of the two major general postmodern schools of thought, skeptical postmodernism appears to present similarly ominous views of the future as that of Nietzsche, which makes sense because Nietzsche is often considered one of the founders of postmodernism (though he probably would have been appalled by such a title). Skeptics often reject history because it is based on values, meanings and contexts that are up for interpretation by the reader of an event. They suppress the importance of the author in regards to texts, and instead promote the importance of readers and their creative capacity to interpret texts on their own. Thus it seems that skeptics offer very little for reflecting on greater historical processes of modernity and, as a result, have little to offer in terms of a better alternative for the future, often rejecting the future as meaningless and stressing the importance of the present as the only meaningful aspect of life. The skeptic vision of society is one of general isolation and individualism, believing that only the individual’s interpretation of meaning and truth is valid. As a result, it is difficult to imagine any more of a just or humanizing alternative system to modernity coming from skeptical postmodernism. Although it may offer important academic critiques and provide stimulating discussions, in regards to offering a substantial change

⁵² Rosenau, 1992, p. 15

⁵³ Ibid

in reality of modern society, it appears to only be able to offer “mental gymnastics”.

Although it shares many similar underlying ideas with skeptics, affirmative postmodernism appears to offer a much more substantially relevant and concrete alternative to modernity. One of the major themes of affirmative postmodernism is the emphasis on the local: “They [affirmatives] look to local space, the place for community. This coincides with their preference for regional resistance, their emphasis on the respect of others’ ‘space’, and their insistence on the preservation of their own ‘place’. Their focus on the local and on the right to space and geography are highly political in character and adapted to the social context.”⁵⁴ There is an obvious political nature of affirmative postmodernism, which emphasizes the rights of the local community, particularly emphasizing the autonomy of indigenous communities to develop and maintain their own identity that has been often attacked by the imperialist nature of modernity. It is in the local community that people can struggle to create a more just and humane environment whereby truth, knowledge, and meaning is derived out of the local context and culture of the intimate community of people. As one can easily see, this premise offers an alternative to the dehumanizing nature of the rationalized modern life.

Furthermore, affirmative postmodernists stress the importance of using critical history that is told from the perspective of the marginalized, which is a concept developed by Nietzsche in his book *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*.⁵⁵ Howard Zinn, a popular critical historian, wrote about the importance of critical history as an alternative to the domination of the powerful in controlling the way history is written and presented in his book *A People’s History of the United States* when he wrote, “The historian’s distortion is more than technical, it is ideological; it is released into a world of contending interests, where any chosen emphasis supports (whether the historian means to or not) some kind of interest, whether economic or political or racial or national or sexual.”⁵⁶ He goes on to say, “Nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 69

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, 1980

⁵⁶ Zinn, 2003, p. 8

conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people...not to be on the side of the executioners.”⁵⁷ Clearly this quote is emphasizing the idea that historical “facts” are always subjective manifestations of power in history. The famous postmodernist Michel Foucault greatly emphasized the idea that knowledge is controlled by structures of power in society. In the words of historian Erna Paris, the question about historical validity becomes a question of “...Whose perception and whose needs? Who gets to decide what happened yesterday, then to tell the tale?”⁵⁸ With the affirmative postmodern reframing of history from the perspective of the marginalized and oppressed in a contextually relevant manner, combined with the stress on the importance of local communities as an alternative to the oppressive and dehumanizing effects of modernity, affirmative postmodernism appears to offer at least a new framework that, in theory, is more just and humanizing than the skeptic vision of society and of the rationalized modern society.

The “Arab Spring”?

From essentially February of 2011 until the current date (December, 2011), there has been and continues to be major social uprisings in many nations in the Arab world (i.e. Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Yemen, etc.) pressing for the replacement of dictators with democracy. While the vast wave of revolutionary protests has not focused solely on democratization, it has often been the most prominent voice in the complex and multifaceted protest movement; needless to say, each nation’s protests are unique in many ways, but democracy has been a popular common thread throughout. Because of the recent and still current nature of this major social movement, there is still much that is yet to be understood or known about it and how it will affect these nations, the region, and the world in years to come. Some have interpreted the Arab Spring as a revolution against neoliberalism⁵⁹, some have interpreted it as an attempt to achieve global

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 10

⁵⁸ Paris, 2000, p. 2

⁵⁹ Atris, A. (2011, February 24). A revolution against neoliberalism? Al Jazeera.

autonomy⁶⁰, and others have simply seen it as an inevitable movement towards modern democracy.

However one chooses to begin to interpret these events, it is clear that the magnitude of this region-wide revolutionary movement (major protests have occurred in several other nations in the region, though have not been as large and/or as publicized) will certainly influence the future of these nations, the region, and, indeed, the world. For the purposes of this paper, it seems that the only major alternative to modernity that may come about from this movement is a new style of democracy based on the values of the very diverse Arab world, and subsequently a shift in global power. There is very little doubt about the gradual global shift in economic and political power from the Western world to the “Eastern” world, as shown by the rise of China and India in global power. This social uprising in the Arab world could be another component of the shift in global power away from the rest. If this is the case, the social, political, and economic structures that form out of the Arab Spring revolutions and the rise in Chinese and Indian power could greatly alter the international institutions’ structures in a manner that is different from the highly rationalized modern institutional structures.

However, it is simply too early to tell and make elaborate predictions. While some analysts believe it is open to boundless possibilities, others believe it will be limited (as much as possible) by the Western world.⁶¹ Many wonder as to how sustainable it may be overtime, and others wonder whether or not it can prevent falling into systems that are just as dehumanizing as modernity. It appears that the “Arab Spring” *mentality* is the greatest threat to modernity and thus is the greatest alternative to it. But like Weber warned about charismatic movements, they are difficult to sustain overtime. Nevertheless, it is an important movement that needs to be acknowledged as a possible alternative to Western modernity as it exists today.

Feminist Alternative?

⁶⁰ Wallerstein, I. (2011, November 14). The contradictions of the Arab Spring. Al Jazeera.

⁶¹ Ibid

In all three of the theorists' ideas and visions of modernity, none directly accounted for the experience, values, and reality of women in modern society. To attempt to imagine a conception of the future without accounting for the experience and reality of half the world's population is not only inadequate, but it is practically irrelevant. Even within the field of sociology, women's experience have been largely limited to the structures, institutions, rules, norms, and principles that have been constructed by men. When discussing the difficulty of female sociologists to reconcile sociological principles with lived experience, Dorothy E. Smith writes, "The effect of the second [domestic 'world'] interacting with the first [male-dominated sociology] is to impose the concepts and terms in which the world of men is thought as the concepts and terms in which women must think their world. Hence in these terms women are alienated from their experience."⁶² Smith contends that sociology itself has been dominated by the males who constructed it, which is based on an abstract, indifferent observation and analysis of social phenomena divorced from one's lived experience and objective situation. For Smith, this dominant structure and framework for analyzing, institutionalizing, and thus defining the sociological world is alienating by its very nature.

In response, Smith proposes a feminist reconstruction of sociology, beginning with its procedures, language, methodology, and analysis. If this is not done, the male-dominated sociological institutions will continue to structurally alienate theory from its actualized experienced reality:

Sociology is part of the practice by which we are all governed and that practice establishes its relevances. Thus the institutions which lock sociology into the structures occupied by men are the same institutions which lock women into the situations in which they find themselves oppressed. To unlock the latter leads logically to an unlocking of the former. What follows then, or rather what then becomes possible—for it is of course by no means inevitable—is less a shift in the subject matter than a different conception of how it is or might become relevant as a means to understand our experience and the conditions of our experience (both women's and men's) in corporate capitalist society.⁶³

⁶² Smith, 1987, p. 86

⁶³ Ibid

Smith's critique of oppressive male-dominated sociological constructions of reality are relevant to this matter of modernity because the structures and processes she describes are largely those of modern scientific rationalism.

Her issue with this perspective is similar to that of the affirmative postmodernists in that it does not adequately account for the power structures that shape the sociologist's interpretation of an observed phenomenon and the manner in which that power structure cannot fully account for the actual lived experience of those being observed in accordance with their values, meanings, and purposes used in living within and understanding life in society. This both alienates those being observed as well as the sociologist observing them because the sociologist is alienated from objective, experienced reality and situations by the abstract, indifferent world of theory, while the observed is alienated from their own reality as described by the sociologist. In order to account for more meaningful sociological perspectives and theories that explain the actual lived experiences of people in social relations with societal institutions, sociology must take a greater account for concrete, objective realities and experiences by including the observed in the investigation in a manner so that they set the tone for the language, meanings, values, and explanations for their lived experience; it must account for social reality on the basis of those that experience the social reality, fully immersing the sociologist into that world. This would reduce the alienating nature of sociology as a whole. For Smith, women are in the best position to bring about this change:

Women's direct experience places her a step back where we can recognize the uneasiness that comes in sociology from its claim to be about the world we live in and its failure to account for or even describe its actual features as we find them in living them. The aim of an alternative sociology would be to develop precisely that capacity from that beginning so that it might be a means to anyone of understanding how the world comes about for her and how it is organized that it happens to her as it does in her experience.⁶⁴

Overall, it appears that Smith's proposal for reconstructing sociology from a feminist perspective allows for a more contextually relevant way to understand and analyze the

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 95

lived experiences of people on their terms. This would enable sociology to analyze and critique institutions and social structures according to the way they actually manifest themselves in the lived reality of people. Thus, the feminist perspective enables sociology to not only take a different perspective on the future of modernity, but also to be able to reevaluate the current perceptions of modernity in accordance to the lived experience of people and not abstract theory that is supported by male-dominated power structures. Though it does not offer a direct alternative to the future of modernity, it instead offers a more contextually relevant approach to understanding lived and experienced reality that can be used to interrogate the actual functions and manifestations of modern society from which to begin making such predictions about the future.

Liberation Theology?

Liberation theology is an interesting perspective to bring into this discussion because of its deep marriage of religion and politics manifesting in concrete historical actions and reality. Furthermore, it is almost peculiar to include it in this paper as a separate alternative vision of society because of its deep roots in Marxism, which has already been addressed. Nevertheless, the author believes that liberation theology has something unique to offer in its historical origins and manifestations amongst oppressed groups, particularly indigenous communities. It is the first major theoretical alternative that is not developed by institutionalized “modern” thinkers, and thus is able to offer a fresh and unique vision of an alternative to modern society (with the exception of the feminist alternative previously described, to an extent).

Having developed in the communities who have experienced oppression, marginalization, and dehumanization for over 500 years, poor Latin Americans in the mid 20th century began to read the Bible in light of their political and historical context and started to see the God of the Bible as first and foremost a liberator of the oppressed. Based on the theological principle of “praxis”, the liberation theology movement challenged orthodox institutions by claiming that true theology can only be seen through the eyes of the poor and oppressed and that salvation is also a historical and political

reality on earth: “More profoundly, the announcement of the Kingdom reveals to society itself the aspiration for a just society and leads it to discover unsuspected dimensions and unexplored paths. The kingdom is realized in a society of brotherhood and justice; and, in turn, this realization opens up the promise and hope of complete communion of all men with God. *The political is grafted into the eternal.*”⁶⁵ There is no separation of religion and politics because they view the incarnation of Jesus (among other things) to be God’s envision of a just society manifesting in concrete history, particularly emphasizing justice in the form of liberating the poor, oppressed, and marginalized in society from their oppressors and the oppressive structures: “Therefore when suffering is inflicted upon the oppressed, it is evil and we must struggle against it. But when suffering arises out of the struggle against suffering, as in the fight against injustice, we accept it as a constituent of our calling and thus voluntarily suffer, because *there is no freedom independent of the fight for justice.*”⁶⁶ Religious devotion and faith is no longer about beliefs and ideas, but about actively participating in the rebuilding of a more just, humanizing society. This is on the assumption that the current society (modern globalized capitalism) is unjust, and that God is opposed to such a system. As James Cone claims in his book *God of the Oppressed*, “Whatever else the gospel of Jesus might be, it can never be identified with the established power of the state. Thus whatever else Christian ethics might be, it can never be identified with the actions of people who conserve the status quo.”⁶⁷

Clearly this movement is revolutionary in its nature, but to what extent and how would this revolutionary society manifest in reality, and how would it differ from modernity? Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez breaks away slightly in his perspective of history from an Enlightenment-derived modern perspective—though it still greatly mirrors Marx and Hegel—when he writes, “History, contrary to essentialist and static thinking, is not the development of potentialities preexistent in man; it is rather the conquest of new, qualitatively different ways of being a man in order to achieve an ever more total and complete fulfillment of the individual in solidarity with all

⁶⁵ Gutierrez, 1973, p. 231-2; emphasis added

⁶⁶ Cone, 1997, p. 163; emphasis added

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 181-2

mankind.”⁶⁸ It is obvious that there is a strong emphasis on the humanity of individuals and the common good of all within this perspective; this is obviously based on Christian principles. However, where they clearly break away from the highly rationalized modern life is in their perspective on the purpose of innovation:

For some, especially in the developed countries, the openness towards the future is an openness to the control of nature by science and technology with no questioning of the social order in which they live. For others, especially in dependent and dominated areas, the future promises conflicts and confrontations, a struggle to become free from the powers which enslave men and exploit social classes. For these people the development of productive forces, in which scientific and technological advances do indeed play an important part, dialectically demands however that the established order be questioned. Without such a challenge, there is no true thrust into the future.⁶⁹

There is a clear distinction about the liberation society’s use of resources with that of the rationalized modern society. According to their perspective, this new society can only be built and lead by the oppressed themselves; any attempt by the powerful or privileged would pervert such an effort. It is for this reason that liberation theology does not attempt to reform the current structures, but rather calls for an entirely new society: “It is evident that only a break with the unjust order and a frank commitment to anew society can make the message of love which the Christian community bears credible to Latin Americans.”⁷⁰ This new society is to be built on the “message of love” of the Christian community, which is to be created and led by the poor via praxis.

While liberation theology is certainly a controversial movement both within and outside the global Christian community, it provides an important alternative vision for society that rejects modernity’s rationalized capitalist modes of production and its underlying values, and replaces them with the values of liberating the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Certainly the aims of this movement are beyond just the community level in their aim to change “unjust structures”. Yet the source of the movement is in the

⁶⁸ Gutierrez, p. 33

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 214-15

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 138

empowerment of the oppressed communities or “base communities”⁷¹; it is praxis to, with, and for the poor. It is embracing those that have been most marginalized by the structures of modernity to lead and construct a “new society” that begins at the community level and reaches beyond to the institutional level. The difficulty with accepting this optimistic view of a more humane and just society is the power structure against which it is fighting. If the 1980s and 1990s revealed anything about the liberation movement it is that the greater social, political, economic, and religious powers in every institution are strongly opposed to its movement and were largely successful in thwarting and breaking up the movement, as shown by the overthrow of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Nonetheless, liberation theology is able to offer an alternative vision of society that infuses the meaning that is derived from religion with a more humane and just society, all resulting from the fresh and unique perspective of the marginalized—which is supportive of affirmative postmodernist’s alternative vision as well.

Individual Coping Mechanisms within Rationalized Modernity

If none of the previously described alternatives suffices for ridding oneself of the iron cage of modernity, George Ritzer recommends different manners in which people can cope with the dehumanizing nature of the rationalized modern life. In his book *The McDonaldization of Society*, Ritzer claims there are three different responses or views of the “cage” of modernity: (1) “velvet cage”, (2) “rubber cage”, and (3) “iron cage”. For those that view rationalization or “McDonaldization” as a velvet cage, “McDonaldization represents not a threat, but nirvana.”⁷² These people enjoy and embrace the highly rationalized, organized, predictable, and efficient lifestyle that the rationalized modern society has to offer. For those that view rationalized modernity as a rubber cage, “the bars...can be stretched to allow adequate means for escape. Such people dislike many aspects of McDonaldization but find others quite appealing.”⁷³ People who respond to rationalized life in this manner tend to go through the many highly rationalized efficient

⁷¹ see Freire, 2000

⁷² Ritzer, p. 187

⁷³ Ibid

processes of life, but will consciously make efforts to escape from it regularly. Some do so by taking quiet trips away from “McDonaldized” areas and services. Others may choose to pursue hobbies that involve concerted time and effort and bring them a sense of enjoyment, such as baking from scratch or painting. The third group—those that see rationalized society as an iron cage—they are more likely to “share the dark and pessimistic outlook of Max Weber and myself [Ritzer], viewing the future as a ‘polar night of icy darkness and hardness’.”⁷⁴ They become increasingly isolated from and offended by the highly rationalized modern life, seeing themselves as marginalized from society.

After describing the three general responses to the rationalized life, Ritzer goes on to suggest a few different personal means of coping with life in the rationalized modern society. First, he suggests creating non-rationalized alternatives for daily life activities, such as co-ops for businesses and attending smaller, liberal arts colleges. He recommends spending money at non-rationalized stores and businesses, such as locally owned stores and bed and breakfasts. He then goes on to cite a few different major organizations and social movements that directly organize to speak out against major rationalized corporations, such as McDonalds, especially to prevent takeovers of locally owned businesses by rationalized corporations (i.e. Walmart). He then goes on to write a large list of minor ways that one can adjust their daily lifestyle activities in order to prevent the complete takeover of rationalism into every sphere of life.⁷⁵ For example, “Avoid daily routine as much as possible. Try to do as many things as possible in a different way from one day to the next.”⁷⁶

For the average person who finds him/herself overwhelmed by the dehumanizing nature of rationalism and its ability to penetrate into every sphere of human activity, this list of possible individual alternatives may seem a bit relieving. However, if one is to truly analyze the deeper underlying issues, it is difficult to accept individual coping mechanisms as any type of solution to such a societal and structural issue. While it is certainly important for people to begin cultivating non-rationalized activities into their

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 188

⁷⁵ For the complete list, see Ritzer p. 204-7

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 204

mental modes and daily activities, the nature of the rationalized modern system is to try to remain as presumed as possible in order to mitigate any questioning of its nature. It is for this reason that most people in modern society often are not even fully consciously aware of these issues until they are elaborated by theorists like Weber, Nietzsche, and Ritzer. For this reason, it seems that while individual coping mechanisms are important, it needs to be addressed structurally at every level. If not, Weber's iron cage is an unavoidable reality.

Synthesis

Having presented many of the complexities of life in modern society and some of its predicted visions for its future, it is difficult to have any understanding of how it may all fit together and what it all means for the future of modernity. I will now attempt to synthesize the ideas of the three major theorists presented with the other possible alternatives presented in order to draw some general conclusions about modernity and its future.⁷⁷ I acknowledge in advance that my synthesize is based on my normative values of having a more just social order that embraces human dignity and allows for the expression of such human creativity and productivity in way that gives a greater sense of purpose and meaning for individuals in society.

Despite its incredibly productive, efficient, and innovative nature, the modern capitalist system is innately alienating and dehumanizing and it will always push towards this tendency, as described by both Marx and Weber. Although some may say that capitalism can be reformed to be more structurally "just" and humanizing, history seems to reveal that it will eventually evolve towards more socially-inclined government policies in order to account for its inadequacies, which Marx and Weber both clearly showed will not solve the problems of human alienation—in fact, Weber argued that it would further rationalize life. However, it is also difficult to fully reject capitalism because its very nature will do everything possible to maintain its survival, particularly with the support of the powerful that benefit from it the most and have the most political

⁷⁷ I apologize for the sudden change to the first-person from the third-person as the author.

influence in society. Nonetheless, modern individuals will have to deal increasingly with the innate contradictions and instability of the modern capitalist system the more it matures. This is especially the case with current euro crisis and the social uprisings that have occurred in response to government austerity measures. The “Occupy Wallstreet” movement may be another example of the discontent that modern capitalism produces in society. Though it may be easy to predict capitalism’s “inevitable” collapse, it appears that the other highly rationalized institutions in society are too dependent on capitalism, and thus will do all that is possible to maintain it. However, it may look very different in the future than it currently manifests itself in society today.

Just as Weber and Nietzsche predicted, it appears that the highly rationalized modern life is incredibly difficult to break free from, and for that reason, it seems that it will remain in modern society. The only feasible alternatives for such a highly rationalized modern society are more likely to originate from and manifest at the community level, as liberation theology and affirmative postmodernists proclaim. Liberation theology is unique, however, in the sense that it represents a revival of meaning from religion into the lives of modern people at the personal, communal, and institutional levels. It offers a deeper sense of meaning and purpose by marrying religious beliefs with the struggle to empower human beings to create just structures and liberate the marginalized individuals and communities to lead the “new society”. While some social theorists, such as Peter Berger and Allan Aldridge, have argued that modern society is already witnessing a process of “desecularization” whereby religion is a more important aspect of modern individuals’ lives, it does not offer a much deeper sense of meaning and purpose because it is greatly based on rational-choice theory⁷⁸; thus it still represents the dehumanizing structure of modern life. The feminist critique of modern modes of knowledge and analysis can enable social theorists to rethink their approach to the study of society and social meanings, values, and movements from the perspective of lived experiences and reality, thus empowering the postmodern concept of the “local” and the liberation theology concept of “praxis” with a sociological framework from those marginalized by the structures and institutions of modernity. However, history has shown

⁷⁸ See Aldridge, 2000; and Berger, 1999

that attempts at such movements have largely been thwarted by institutional powers that promote and defend the status quo. As a result, it is difficult to predict this is a major alternative without also romanticizing the community and embracing idealism.

Certainly other potential alternatives to modernity lay in the future institutions and structures that are being created in the emerging world powers, such as China, India, and possibly the Arab world. In many respects, people are anxiously watching the Arab Spring movement to see if the mentality of protest for humanizing and just societal structures will be able to be sustained and institutionalized in a fashion that is markedly different from the Western world. However, it appears from at least the policies of China and India that they will continue to emphasize production, efficiency and growth just as much as Western modern capitalist societies, but perhaps with different rules, procedures, and terminology. Nonetheless, in that case rationalization will remain into the next world order of power. Furthermore, it is far too early to attempt to predict what will become of the Arab Spring and the emergence and takeover of new non-Western global powers.

Overall, until a strong plausible alternative is developed, the iron cage appears to be just that: escape-proof. And it would appear that society cannot go back from modernity and the modern worldview since it has so deeply penetrated into every other area of life. Sadly, modernity appears to have narrowed our minds and imaginations so much so that we struggle to imagine other systems outside of the modern capitalist-socialist-communist paradigm. However, as Weber pointed out, if the future is still open, hope may exist for a society that is structured in such a way that provides a more meaningful life, particularly from the community level, and more particularly amongst communities that been most marginalized by modernity. Until such an alternative is developed and manifested in reality, it appears that the iron cage is the future of life in modern society.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that in many important manifestations, modernity is still very alive and present. Although there are some paradigmatic shifts within academic and theoretical movements, the majority of people still experience their social reality within the highly rationalized institutions of modern society. This presents some very troubling implications for what living a meaningful life within such a structure looks like, and many social theorists have attempted to explain what the future may hold for modernity. Although the future appears to be rather bleak and fatalistic, there does appear to be some alternatives for the current modern system that may be able to provide a more meaningful and purposeful life. However, any changes as such will not easily occur, and will most likely require struggle and sacrifice. In the meantime, the “iron cage” of modernity still appears to greatly entrap many in the rationalized modern society, and in many ways it appears that it is growing rather than dying. It is important to continue to engage in such a discourse as society moves forward in history, especially in light of the major social movements and global changes that are occurring. To break free from the iron cage, it seems that for now people will have to continue to look to the future for the key to their escape.

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