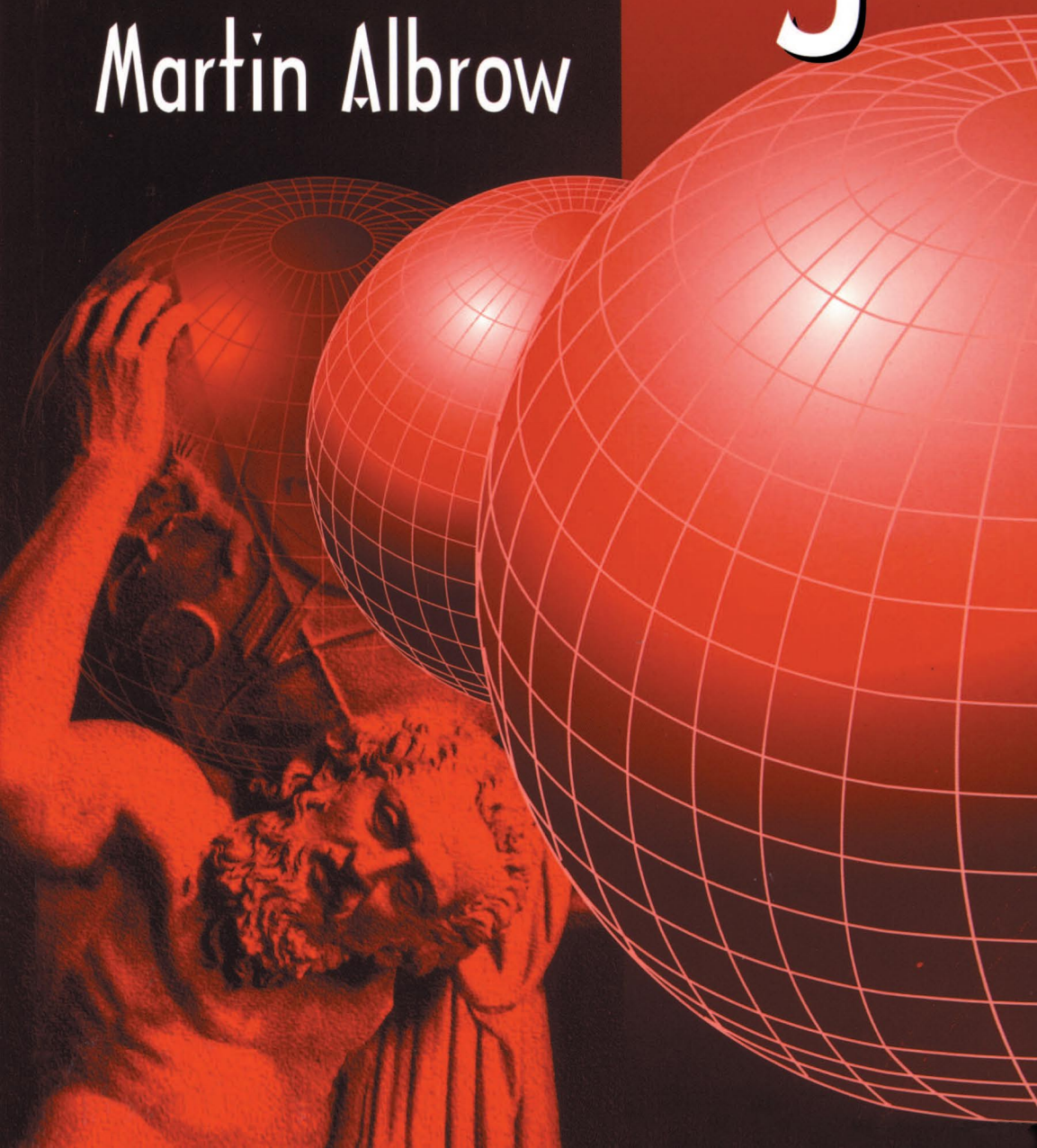
The Global Age

Martin Albrow



The Global Age

For SJO

The Global Age

State and Society Beyond Modernity

MARTIN ALBROW

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Introduction

> The balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on global climate.
>
> United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 1995

A sense of rupture with the past pervades the public consciousness of our time. It extends beyond national and ideological differences. The American sociologist Alvin Toffler (1981) announced the dying of industrial civilization and has become a favoured source for Republican Party thinking. In Britain the Marxist 'New Times' project reported a qualitative change so deep as to be an epochal transition (Hall and Jacques 1989).

At the same time, despite all the 'new age' talk ('age of automation', 'atomic age', 'space age', 'electronic age', 'solar age'), the idea that we are still in some sense 'modern' is remarkably persistent. It indicates how successful the thinking of modernity has been in claiming any innovation as its own, even a 'new age'. As a result the postmodern has never escaped modernity. It has only been able to define itself in relation to the modern, and for some is only a phase of it: 'our postmodern modern' for the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch (1993).

Modernity holds its adherents in a double bind: it promises new futures and at the same time denies any possibility of an alternative to itself. As we know from interpersonal relations, double binds are designed to lock people in by involving them in irresolvable argument. Escape comes by refusing to accept the terms of discussion. We can only do this by moving on beyond both modernity and postmodernity and recognizing a new reality. I am suggesting then that

theoretical argument has for some time been trapped by the narcissism of modernity even as the world has moved on.

This book confronts theory with the reality of the Global Age in which we now live. The argument is new, although it was hinted at by Karl Jaspers (1955), who saw how the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 implicated the globe as a whole. Edward Tiryakian (1984a) went as far as seeing the 'global crisis as an interregnum of modernity'. Yet, in spite of 'globalization' becoming 'the epithet of choice' (Himmelfarb 1995: ix), those who have recognized it as a major social transformation (notably Beck 1986, Giddens 1990 and Robertson 1992) have still stressed the continuity of modernity.

But people sense epochal change in world events. For me the most compelling announcement comes today (as I write), from the United Nations Panel on Global Warming, which has for the first time unequivocally announced that global warming is happening. There could not be a more dramatic marker of epochal change. If Hiroshima marked the beginning, surely this marks the end of the transitional period into the Global Age. But it also means the Modern Age has passed.

There is a deep contradiction between this experience of epochal change and the language of modernity which leaves our public discourse in an incoherent state. Modern visions of a globalized world tend to see it in some familiar guise: realization of world government; a single world market; a new world order; global culture; late modernity. I contend that none of these provide an adequate account of the flux through which we have moved. We are at one of those moments when we have to recognize that our ideas have stayed still too long and we need a new beginning.

It is not so much that they are partial accounts; any account of a 'change in the world' is, but each carries with it too much of the modern past and too little of the difference we experience. Indeed any talk of the end of modernity sounds so destructive that it evokes the appalling prospect of 'the end of history'. The intention of this book is to address the problem of making the new intelligible without either assimilating it to the world we have lost or announcing the Last Judgement. It offers neither comfort nor apocalypse.

This then is an intervention into the thoughtworld of modernity. It intrudes by asking the reader to think the unthinkable, namely that the Modern Age has actually finished but that *history has not ended.* Instead another age has taken its place, with its own dominant features and shape. We will then, with the advantage of our position in the new age, be able to assess the one which has passed. We also depict the new age in terms which are not specifically modern. For there is an inherent fault in the narrative of modernity itself. It only satisfies the human longing for immortality by securing itself against

ever ending. This book is about coming to terms with the present as history, that is as part of a story in which all times are equal in the sight of God. We can write of epochal change in the past. There is no reason to deny the possibility for the present.

This cannot be done without challenging both the language and the interpretation of the facts in the modern theory of globalization. What some have called 'global babble' (beginning with Marshall McLuhan's 'global village', 1962) involves intense controversy about globalization and whether it really does mean anything new. But much of it is talking at cross purposes because of the inappropriateness of an older modern discourse about novelty which sought always to assimilate it to modernity, an ever renewed present arising as a trend out of the past.

It is concern to do justice to the times in which we live which makes it necessary to take history into our account. It is not antiquarian interest which requires a review of modernity as a historical phenomenon. The true 'test of time' is to recognize the Modern Age as a passing stage of history. Simultaneously we acknowledge that humanity has more potential than could ever be contained in one period, however dynamic and expansive it might have been. We don't in this way assimilate the Global Age to the Modern, or indeed any age or culture to any other; rather we disaggregate their achievements to provide us with the full array of human possibilities. Humanity is the subject, neither necessarily the 'modern' nor the 'global' human being.

The first three chapters of this book reassess the problems of writing about the Modern Age. Chapter 1 considers the general requirements for writing the history of the present. These involve rescuing it from the self-narratives of modernity. Chapter 2 shows how narratives of modernity were intrinsic to the Modern Project as a comprehensive frame for living, both material and ideal, over which the nation-state claimed jurisdiction. Chapter 3 points to the culmination of the Modern Project as its simultaneous dissolution and therefore the need to find a new historical narrative.

Chapter 4 sifts the language of the global for the contribution it can make towards a new self-understanding of our times. Chapter 5 reviews accounts of our own times and finds that these misinterpret epochal change by seeking to assimilate globality to a past Modern Age.

Chapters 6 and 7 accept the consequences of treating our time as a new epoch, beyond modernity. They explore the new configurations of phenomena, which have in the past only been seen as features of modernity, or of its impending dissolution, to show their own characteristic non-modern coherence.

Chapter 8 examines the consequences of the Global Age thesis for politics and argues that it requires us to resume conceptualizations of

society and the state which were suppressed by modernity. It identifies a new popular construction of the state which I call performative citizenship. Politicians as a result need to heed the relativization of the nation-state and their claims on its citizens which they took for granted in the Modern Age.

Chapter 9 concludes by arguing that the Global Age narrative contains more than an appeal to change the way we think about our own time. It equally needs to be treated as an explanatory hypothesis for cultural shift and social transformation.

New thinking requires new research. It must by now be clear that the mass of research around modernity, on industrialization, democratization, bureaucratization, urbanization, and rationalization, carried with it a sense of a relentless overall process of modernization. Yet none of those 'processes' ever reached a determinate end-point, and all of them have been transmuted into what now appear to be features of a past historical period. They never were processes in the sense of developments governed by scientific laws with necessary outcomes, nor is globalization. The '-ization' suffix of globalization is an indication in itself of the inappropriate attempt to assimilate it to the modern. It leads to accounts which minimize the contemporary transformation. It cannot possibly be adequate for the epochal shift which Ralf Dahrendorf (1975) described as the move from expansion to survival with justice.

Some imagine that globalization is about the expansion of free trade. But even among economists it is well recognized that this is only one aspect of a transformation in the world economy in which changes in production and consumption are central. But accounts of globalization as simply economic betray a narrow economistic outlook, when we are involved in a comprehensive social transformation. Those who imagine that globalization is about trade barriers are seriously unprepared to understand what is happening.

Fundamentally the Global Age involves the supplanting of modernity with globality and this means an overall change in the basis of action and social organization for individuals and groups. There are at least five major ways in which globality has taken us beyond the assumptions of modernity. They include the global environmental consequences of aggregate human activities; the loss of security where weaponry has global destructiveness; the globality of communication systems; the rise of a global economy; and the reflexivity of globalism, where people and groups of all kinds refer to the globe as the frame for their beliefs.

Taken together these represent the greatest challenge yet to the idea of ever expanding modernity, and hence to the nation-state. Moreover this challenge to nation-states encourages their citizens and other agencies to cross and transgress their physical and conceptual boundaries.

The total effect is of a social transformation which threatens the nation-state in a more extensive way than anything since the international working-class movement of the nineteenth century. Modern discourse persistently misreads this. National governments wrestle with the disaggregation of state and nation, seek to reduce government while administering a global rationality and simultaneously lose touch with their populations.

We can agree with Zygmunt Bauman (1992: 65) that postmodern conditions mean we can no longer attach our analytical models to the nation-state. But what are these conditions? Encoding them with 'globalization' in general has been inadequate to grasp the nature of the epochal shift for reasons which the book will set out in detail. We are on much safer ground with 'globality' since it carries no connotation of necessary outcomes. But then the complex, often contradictory, directions in which globality relates to life require us to register the change as epochal. I know of no better way to do this than through 'the Global Age'.

This book draws on many disciplines but its main problem setting arises out of the interplay of sociology, social and political theory, history and the newer field of cultural studies. I hope there will be interested readers in all four disciplinary areas and that they may find room for the new category of epochal theory on their shelves. The broad relevance of epochal theory is not in providing a set of answers to universal problems. It points rather to issues arising out of the conditions of human existence, where the solutions vary in different periods of history and cultures. They include reaching understanding; communication; relations between people; life and death; right and wrong; reward and punishment; power, freedom and consent; humanity and nature.

Answers to these issues are not foundations for our lives in the way that food, warmth and shelter are. But the recurrence of ideas like 'society', 'state', 'community', 'welfare', 'justice' suggests that they are not merely modern fixes, because they never acquire a final meaning. It is a mark of epochal change that they are called in for fundamental reappraisal.

The best term I can find for this as a philosophical position is 'pragmatic universalism'. It rests neither on scientific nor on religious certainties, but on the daily lived experience of human beings and its comparative cultural and historical record. On a scale of late modern thought in which Michel Foucault is at point zero and Alasdair MacIntyre at point ten, I settle around point six. Finding a way between these two wild extremes, a ruthless scientific relativism and living as a quest for meaning in living, is the fate of anyone who seeks to grasp the contemporary world. Max Weber has long provided a model for this

kind of intellectual equilibration. His work is one of the most abiding legacies of modernity, but the Global Age obliges us to go beyond it.

I therefore make no apology to Weber or my contemporaries in declaring that the contributions of premodern and non-Western thinkers can illuminate the debate about globalization. In scholarly terms this requires us to rethink our understanding of globalization and globality in terms of epochal theory. At a broader human level it is an invitation to respect all peoples as potential sources of wisdom for our own time. Already the Global Age is the first period in human history when both sexes and all peoples have gone a substantial way towards asserting an equal right to make their contribution to the common stock of human knowledge.

In everyday terms the message is 'Forget modernity'. See what it does to your language and behaviour if you stop worrying whether something is modern or not. Ask what it is you are being persuaded of when you are told that an outlook is modern. Substitute the words 'new', 'contemporary', 'present-day', 'rational' for modern where appropriate. Judge the newness of a product on some ground or other rather than simply welcoming its novelty. Get used to thinking of 'old modern' things. Collect old-fashioned modernist memorabilia if you wish, but remember you are not simply *after* modernity. Escape the stifling hold of the modern on the imagination. We live in our own time and the Global Age opens worlds up to us in unprecedented ways.

Very often someone else's contribution to one's own thinking is greatest where there is disagreement and a roll call of names could be very misleading. I doubt whether there is a single idea in this book which doesn't have antecedents elsewhere, not all of which I know, some of which I have retrieved from a long time back. Yet in the Global Age there is no premium for novelty. Even though I claim that the configuration of ideas is original and has never been advanced before, you should judge their worth by other standards.

1

Resuming the History of Epochs

> The most decisive event in inaugurating the Modern Age was the 'discovery of America' in 1492. Similarly epoch making was the event which signalled its impending termination, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. In between, the story of modernity was of a project to extend human control over space, time, nature and society. The main agent of the project was the nation-state working with and through capitalist and military organization. It gave a distinctive shape to people's lives and the passing of generations. But the culmination of the project in the unification of the world was also its dissolution. With the end of the epoch, postmodern disorientation became widespread even as markers were laid for the coming new age. It was just not recognized at first for what it was. The Cold War, the Three Worlds, the human landing on the moon in 1969, the electronic 'global village', triumph of the United States with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and finally global warming were not triumphant modernity but signs of the new globality. In the 1980s 'globalization' became the keyword. In the 1990s came the general recognition that the Modern Age was at an end and that the Global Age had already begun.
>
> Anon. AD 2050

1.1 Refusing to be Modern

Why there is an alternative to the forced choice between everlasting modernity and the end of history

The account which heads this chapter will strike some as odd, even self-contradictory. Its anonymous author may be in school now and yet writes like a rather conventional, somewhat old-fashioned historian.

It reads like a modern narrative and yet announces the end of the Modern Age. Does this not undermine the basis for the account? We are left feeling discomfited by a history of our own time written in the way it has been done for past eras.

Yet I would contend that the narrative makes good sense. The difficulties which arise stem not from its self-contradictions, but from the wider and current confusions in contemporary accounts of modernity and postmodernity. It ought to be entirely possible to write of the end of the Modern Age and the beginning of a new one, if that is indeed what has happened. But we haven't even been able to contemplate the possibility of such an account. Modernity has kept a tenacious grip on the imagination of intellectuals, even after it has lost its hold on the world.

Our difficulties have arisen because accounts of the Modern Age have sought to find some foundation for it in a philosophical 'modernity'. Then, as the Modern Age passes away, they assume that the foundations are crumbling and with them the possibility of making any sense of our time. To this extent the proponents of modernity and postmodernity share a common assumption, namely that without founding principles the world makes no sense. They disagree only on whether such principles exist.

Yet epochs, cultures, civilizations have no more arisen out of ideas and principles than religion out of theology, or society from sociology. In contrast, our fictional narrator writes of the epoch as a unique constellation of human striving, impersonal forces, underlying processes and key events at a level of the highest generality. She or he references a configuration of our time, not as a theory or principle, but as real constraints. The talk is of power blocs, of nuclear warfare, of threats to the body. In contrast to the much noticed contemporary proliferation of histories of any and every thing, this is 'grand narrative'.[1]

This book arises out of the discourse of a new epoch. It is bound to reopen issues of the past, because it is in the past that we can identify the growth of the distorted sense of the present. So although our direct concern will be with the transformation since the end of the Second World War, we are bound to take issue with accounts of a much longer past, the Modern Age. We can no longer see modernity as an irresistible movement. For it hasn't turned out that way. We will therefore be seeking both to identify the Global Age, but also to achieve recognition of the Modern Age as a transitory epoch with its peculiar features, which has given way to another.

The new age is not the postmodern, even if it comes after the modern. From Wolfgang Welsch's viewpoint (1993: 6) the postmodern is only the latest radical form of modernity. To John Gray (1995: viii) postmodernity is the self-undermining of modernity. In both cases

postmodernity is the expression, however self-destructive, of modernity. The modern retains its hold on the intellectual imagination.

We have to listen to the language of the new age in a wider discourse. It resounds most in 'global' and all its variations: 'globalization', 'globalism', 'globality' and others. They are labels for new perspectives, styles, strategies, forces, interests and values which do not necessarily make novelty a virtue and which in numerous ways replace the directions of modernity. They signal the comprehensive transformation which is what historians have recognized as a change of epoch.

We have not learned truly to write the history of the present. This failure arises from the way modernity survives sufficiently to impede our recognition of historical change in our own time. Most seriously it means that even those who recognize globalization as a profound contemporary transformation seek to assimilate it to modernity. We can see a representative example in one of the most important books of the 1980s, Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society*.

He opened his book (1986/1992: 9) with the statement that the prefix 'post-' had become the key word of our times. He found it was a symptom of a historical break, but yet he located it still within modernity. It expressed a new kind of reflexive modernization beyond industrial society, in which the production of risk became more important than the production of wealth. Even where the risks encompassed the globe as a whole, which is where Beck introduced the idea of globalization, it appeared that modernity could continue its reflexive path.

Yet this misses the limits to reflexivity which the global reference highlights. Reflexivity in any sphere ultimately terminates in the non-reflective, the obstacle or the decision which represents the end of analysis, the time to act. Confronting the globe as a whole is just such a point, where there is such a check to expansive modernity that a real transformation takes place.

Modernity has so transfixed the intellectual imagination that the prospect of its end even promotes the idea of the end of history as such (Fukuyama 1992), or at least the end of the writing of history as the story of humanity (Lyotard 1979, Vattimo 1988). But these famous paradoxes arise from modernity's claim to monopolize novelty. If everything new is by definition modern then it cannot grasp its own end as the beginning of a new epoch. Far from modernity giving history its full dignity, it deprives the past of any meaning except as a prelude to itself, and cannot imagine the future except as its own continuation, or else chaos.

The many announcements of the end of the Modern Age should encourage us to bring questions of historical periodization to the fore again. The problem is, however, that without a new beginning the announcement of the 'end of' a period sounds like the end of all we have

loved.[2] For even in their quest for the new, the sense of being at one with the past is what bonded modern people together. In the introduction to the *Cambridge Modern History*, which acquired at the beginning of the twentieth century widespread authority in defining the Modern Age, we can hear its authentic voice, this self-understanding of modernity:

> It is this sense of familiarity which leads us to draw a line and mark out the beginnings of modern history. On the hither side of this line men speak a language which we can readily understand; they are animated by ideas and aspirations which resemble those animating ourselves; the forms in which they express their thoughts and the records of their activity are the same as those still prevailing among us. Any one who works through the records of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries becomes conscious of an extraordinary change of mental attitude, showing itself on all sides in unexpected ways. (Creighton 1902: 1–2)

The author was writing of what was often called at the time a 'consciousness of kind'. Modern people 'resemble ourselves' and that reference extended in both time and space, back to the fifteenth century but also only to Europe and North America and all that came under their sway. Modernity dominated thought to the extent that it became impossible to gain detachment from it. It was about 'us' and all to which we aspired. And 'we', the smaller part of humanity, represented ourselves as being at the ever advancing cutting edge of History. The Modern Age was no passing phenomenon, it rolled forward relentlessly and triumphantly.

The resumption of historical periodization is only possible if we find a way of writing about our own time as a new period. In other words we have to be as confident as Creighton was for the Modern Age that we can find a vantage point for today that separates us from him. At the same time, and this will become clear in the course of the book, this depends on treating all humanity as equal in the light of the Global Age. We already have intimations of this new recognition of our time. So Fernandez-Armesto's (1995) treatment of the last millennium in the histories of the Americas, Africa and Asia, where they are equal in salience to Europe's for understanding the present, is one which prepares us for the dramatically different vantage point of a new age. He concludes by reflecting on the possible future courses of the new global culture, oscillating between universality and diversity (p. 710), and although he does not challenge the conventional characterization of modernity he effectively relativizes it.

Such an account of the new globality is an implicit invitation to go beyond the postmodern sense of an end of an age and to announce the beginning of a new one, the Global Age. It encourages us to think, not of the way modernity has outstripped all other times and cultures, but, on the contrary, the way in which any appreciation of our own place

in historical time must be prepared to give precedence to ideas from other times and other cultures. In this way we demonstrate our appreciation of the significance of the limits of the Modern Age. We show that we see it for what it was, a passing historical episode, without denying its world-historical significance as the expansion of the West. Yet this is still difficult for us to do, and to make it easier we need to understand how modernity laid claim to exclusive rights on the course of history.

1.2 From Universal History to the People's Epic

How the grand narrative ceased to be a divine story and celebrated the self-creation of the Modern Age

The Oxford historian and philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1946: 49–52) attributed the invention of the idea of historical periodization to the early Christians. They had to see history as universal, working according to God's will, divided by a divine event, Christ's coming, and then further divided into periods by epoch-making events. Against that background we can see what the Modern Age did. It turned history into an instrument for the rulers of emerging nation-states. Later it was to represent the nation-state as the achievement of all the people. First it had to instruct the princes who could direct events.

When the seventeenth-century Bishop of Meaux, J.-B. Bossuet, wrote his 'discourse on universal history' for the benefit of the young heir to the throne of France, he began: 'While history might be of no use to other people, princes have to read it' (1681/1887: 1), and presented him with a panorama where the ruler, with the oversight of a nation, surveyed a field where potentially anything in the world could become a matter of concern and cause for action. Far below him was the milieu of ordinary people, protected from the greater perturbations.

The scale and the distance, detail and generality of Bossuet's account provided the logical ground for administrative and social hierarchy. As the concerns of the higher orders extended over an ever widening area of territory, the only logical culmination was a conception of a world order with a single ruler.

The idea which guided his historical narrative equally underpinned the whole of the modern period; namely human control had to expand to take in the whole world.[3] Universal history required the creation of a unified field of human discourse, providing a single frame of events, making one world. This was the Modern Project and universal history was its record, its accompaniment and its achievement. But it was the record of human, not God's, deeds.

The supreme rationalist Voltaire (1694–1778) acknowledged the Christian bishop's method and took it forward in a new exemplary manner. In his *The Age of Louis XIV* he praised Bossuet's narrative art: 'He applied the art of oratory to history itself, a literary genre which would seem incapable of admitting it' (Voltaire 1751/1926: 360–1). Universal history had to be the grand narrative, along with the ordering of time into epochs.[4] Moreover he brought them up to his own time, which meant the potential was there to record new beginnings in the present.[5]

Self-description as a time of new beginnings was a mark of the new age. Already in 1470 'modern music' was being dated as beginning in 1430. There was 'modern' painting in the mid-sixteenth century (Burke 1987: 17). The Modern Age began with a sense of many beginnings, of both innovation and discovery. It was carried especially in references to a 'new world'. Later to be a cliché, at the time it was coined by Amerigo Vespucci in an open letter to Lorenzo de Medici it reflected the conjuncture of two distinct spheres, novelty and earthly existence, which hitherto had inhabited different fields of thought (Ginzburg 1982: 82).

For a world itself to be new meant a challenge from the outside, novelty not simply out of self-directed development in the arts and sciences, but from other human beings who presented real-life alternatives to what had been assumed to be the world. The 'new world' rapidly became an image which opened up the possibility of a new social order, of realizing Utopia on earth. Not just works of art but institutions and ways of life could potentially be otherwise.

Discovery of 'unknown' worlds disturbed the thoughts of ordinary people, like the miller Mennochio (1532–99) from a Friulian village, whose recurrent speculations around dangerous themes of alternatives to the present order, stimulated on his own admission by reading the travels of Sir John Mandeville, made him so uncomfortable to the Church of his time that he was burnt at the stake (Ginzburg 1982: xiii).

The discovery of the 'new world' was a dramatic intensification of the stimulus which contact with foreign lands had already given to European culture. For an intelligent peasant, mayor of his village, the result was 'heresy' and death. For the educated Mayor of Bordeaux, Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), it prompted reflection on the decline of the old world and the corruption it was introducing into the new (Montaigne 1580/1842: 421). For him the simplicity of the new world surpassed the aspirations of the philosophers in demonstrating what a pure Utopia could be like (p. 89). It threw into relief the arbitrariness of one's own country and its customs. It strengthened his conviction about the educational worth of travel. The child should learn against a background of the diversity of the whole world (p. 63).

Reports from the newly named 'America' were already a stimulus to the reflections of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516/1970), and they inspired, as well as Montaigne, a tradition of libertarian speculation and radical reformers including Rousseau and Thomas Paine (Weatherford 1988: 117–31). It was also a new world to be conquered, to be subjected to the artifices of European forms of government, to be converted to Christianity, to become the arena for the most self-conscious effort yet to create a new civilization, freed from the incubus of the old. The 'new world' was to become later the United States, where modernity has been able to develop with the least encumbrance from the past.

This sense of continual innovation held the age together. It was the continuing basis of its self-narrative. In 1895 Lord Acton began his brief but brilliant tenure of the Chair of Modern History in Cambridge with an inaugural lecture on the study of his subject by declaring that: 'The modern age did not descend from the mediaeval by normal succession, with outward tokens of legitimate descent. Unheralded, it founded a new order of things, under a law of innovation, sapping the ancient reign of continuity' (1906: 3). It continued this way up to his own time. This for him was the main point of its study: 'it is a narrative told of ourselves, the record of a life which is our own, of efforts not yet abandoned to repose, of problems that still entangle the feet and vex the hearts of men' (p. 8).

This sense of contemporary newness has also become the main defence erected by modern ways of thought against the demise of modernity. Can there ever be another epoch when the modern claims to be the ever new? Does it make sense to think of ourselves as anything other than modern? On the face of it, it ought to be easy. If the Modern Age is a period in history, surely like any other it can end. But, to counter that, if the modern is the new, it seems to have the secret of perpetual self-renewal. For modernity, men (much more than women, who only give birth) become gods. To solve this conundrum we have to sift the ingredients of the unique mix of narrative art and scientific theory which enabled modernity to have its cake and eat it too, to found a new historical epoch and yet never be replaced.

1.3 A Science of Historical Periods

How Marx's materialist version of Aristotle's muthos *was only replaced with the baleful prospect of everlasting modernity*

In the early modern period, writing history was still a narrative art. As such it was subordinate to doctrines which sought to find the deeper

sense of human accounts of themselves. In the classical Greek theory, history as an account of the facts was definitely inferior to poetry, which explored the profounder reality. But this elevated rather than undermined the idea of the historical epoch. For Aristotle's *Poetics* endowed any story of human affairs with a poetic structure, with beginning, middle and end. It was this, the plot (*muthos*), which made sense of the incidents.

The Aristotelian emphasis on the beginning of the plot resonated perfectly with the modern experience of new discovery. Discovering beginnings became a central concern for modern historical scholarship. It became the obsessive concern of the lonely genius, Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), Professor of Rhetoric in Naples, whose *New Science* went through three editions in 1725, 1730 and 1744 as he sought to solve the mystery of the origins of nations.

'The nature of things is nothing else than their origins at particular times and in particular circumstances' (Vico quoted by Meinecke 1959: 63). Looking for origins, the researcher finds clues in language, everyday sayings and above all in fables and myth. In the products of the human mind are elements of which their producers are not aware. They are therefore importantly not creations of individual authors, but of the experience of a whole community of people, and reaching out beyond them to a common humanity (Said 1975/1978: 347–81). The spirit of the age is therefore diffused throughout its people.

There was another Aristotelian theme which inspired the new historical understanding. The interrelatedness of facts and incidents which is the *muthos* diverts attention from the single author to the collective story. Drawing connections over time and space permits constructions not only between contemporaries, but between them and their forebears. Credit for perceiving the intrinsic link between collective culture and history belongs to a local historian of the city of Osnabruck, Justus Möser (1720–94). He inferred that the principles of composition which establish the connectedness of the locality ('local reason') apply equally to time periods. 'Every period has its style' was his motto (Meinecke 1959: 329) and he made explicit the connection between Aristotelian poetic principles and the authorless text of history.[6]

In brief, at the dawn of high modernity, the period of the Enlightenment, humanity had become the collective author of novelty, of all new beginnings. At the same time, on poetic principles, the story of the author had a beginning, middle and end too. The tension between these two viewpoints remained to the end of the Modern Age. It became the site for the development of the social sciences. In them science devoted to beginnings merged with a narrative of humanity's story. In this respect Karl Marx became the prime representative of modernity's

attempt to resolve its intellectual contradictions in his quest for a science of history.

Marx dismissed Möser's 'patriotic visions' in a brief footnote. He accused him of never abandoning 'the respectable, petty-bourgeois "home-baked", ordinary, narrow horizon of the philistine, and which nevertheless remain pure fancy' (Marx and Engels 1975a: 287).[7] Typical Marx polemic, but there was more behind it than abuse. Historical materialism, as Marx and Engels developed it, contained at its heart a theory of historical epochs or periods. It depicted the succession from the ancient world to the medieval, from medieval to modern. It made no attempt to challenge what were by then the generally accepted periods of European history.

But it went much further than that. Each epoch had its Aristotelian beginning, middle and end. Moreover each had its plot, an unfolding story of the development of the means of production and their ever growing disparity with the social relations of the time, so that eventually one type of society passed away to be replaced with another. It was a comprehensive movement covering every aspect of people's lives.

No narrative structure could be more dramatic. It was the basis of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 – 'The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms' (Marx and Engels 1976b: 485). 'Modern industry', following the discovery of America, established the world market. The 'modern bourgeoisie' developed with it, establishing its own committee, the 'modern state'.

Modern, modern, modern: Marx and Engels wrote the history of modernity. This was an abiding, core feature of their work, a life's work deliberately undertaken.[8] In *The German Ideology* in 1846 they had set out to supplant the idealist conception of history. For them its basic mistake was to imagine that history could be written from the standpoint of the ideas of the historical actors. It was the illusion of the epoch – 'It takes every epoch at its word and believes that everything it says and imagines about itself is true' (Marx and Engels 1976a: 62).

By contrast their materialist conception explained ideas from material practice. It took people's social relations, the methods by which they produced things, the way these related to nature, their funds of capital, and it showed how each generation took a given situation and modified it for its successors. The historian had to take ideas back to people, not move into the realm of pure spirit (pp. 54–5).

They wrote the history of modernity without a *concept* of the modern. They had no difficulty in accepting the completely conventional use of the term modern, precisely because for them it paralleled