Antiquity and Modernity

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Antiquity and Modernity

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For Anne

Eine Welt zwar bist du, o Rom; doch ohne die Liebe
Wäre die Welt nicht die Welt, wäre denn Rom auch nicht Rom.
Goethe, *Römische Elegien* I

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Preface

From the end of the eighteenth century, commentators on human affairs became increasingly convinced that they and their society were experiencing an entirely new form of existence, which came to be labelled "modernity." The adjective "modern" had hitherto been synonymous with "contemporary," such that "modern art" was simply the art currently being produced in contrast to the art of the past, but increasingly "modern" came to imply a qualitative as well as a temporal distinction. Indeed, it became possible both to argue that some aspects of classical antiquity could be considered "modern," because of their resemblance to contemporary experience, and to assert that many parts of the modern world (largely, but not exclusively, areas outside Europe) were not, by any definition, "modern." Further, modernity came to be experienced as all-pervasive; all aspects of contemporary life and all the products of human endeavor were felt to embody and reflect this distinctive quality, to reveal the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age.

This sense that life in the present was somehow quite different from the lives of previous generations gave new impetus to the investigation and analysis of human society and human nature; it resulted in new theories and ideas, and in entirely new fields of knowledge – the origins of disciplines like economics and sociology. To some extent this intellectual activity ran in parallel with, and was frequently inspired by, the rational investigation of the physical and natural worlds according to scientific methods rather than the received wisdom of scripture or the ideas inherited from the ancients. However, where the scientists and philosophers were dedicated to uncovering the universal and eternal principles that lay beneath the apparent confusion and variety of natural phenomena, the students of human behavior, social organization, and culture sought rather to strike a balance between the universal and the contingent. Most

of them were concerned above all to understand their own society, not simply as an end in itself but in order to further its progress or address its deficiencies; they sought to identify universal principles in the apparent chaos of human history above all in order to understand the origins, nature, and dynamics of their own age.

Indeed, the sheer variety of political systems, social structures, forms of economic behavior, cultural activities, and even emotions and values across human history led many of these commentators to emphasize historical discontinuity far above continuity. The present was clearly distinguished from the past; modernity was entirely different from any previous form of human existence. In the course of the nineteenth century, the "sciences of modernity," sociology, political theory, psychology, and above all, economics, turned away from history; if they looked to the past at all, it was to those relatively recent periods which could plausibly be labeled as "proto-modern" and claimed as the starting point of the transformation of the world into its present state. Today, over a century later, this sense of the irrelevance of the past to the present persists, and, even when that is questioned, the idea of "modernity" is not; it is taken for granted that, despite all their manifest differences, the present and the early nineteenth century have something in common that distinguishes them from the rest of human history. Closer enquiry into what this commonality might be yields a bewildering range of theories and assertions, as each discipline – not to mention many individual thinkers – has developed at least one distinct interpretation of the nature of modernity. Somehow this incoherence does not matter; we remain firmly of the opinion that we are modern, and this denotes above all a separation from the past.

It seems remarkable that this taken-for-granted concept of modernity, and the many different (and often mutually contradictory) theories that have been developed to explain what may, after all, be an entirely imaginary object, have not been subjected to greater critical scrutiny. The reason may lie in the overwhelming scale of the task, since in principle almost every piece of writing from the late eighteenth century to the present could be taken as relevant to the history of the understanding of contemporary society as "modern." The aim of this book is more modest, though still daunting and overambitious: to approach this topic by considering the theme of the relation between "modernity" and the – arguably, equally taken-for-granted and equally imaginary – idea of "antiquity." The indifference to history found in later exponents of economics or sociology was not shared by the writers whose work laid the foundations for those new

disciplines; on the contrary, their interpretations of the present, and indeed their sense that contemporary existence had a distinctive quality that needed to be identified and explained, were founded on constant reference to the past, and above all the classical past. Modernity was defined through contrast with different aspects of the past; its progress was measured against the yardstick of the greatest civilizations in history; ancient thinkers, while now clearly redundant in the interpretation of contemporary society, could still be important for understanding the dynamics of historical change that had eventually given rise to modernity. The past might even hold clues to the future, suggesting the eventual fate of even the most powerful civilizations, unless modernity could somehow break free of the inexorable processes of history. Even more importantly, for those writers who were less persuaded that modernity had surpassed all previous historical societies, the classical past offered a basis for criticism, a point of comparison that was not wholly in modernity's favor, and a vision of possible alternatives to the present state of things.

Modernity was defined and delineated by innumerable comparisons and contrasts between past and present, in many different texts, over the course of more than a century. Some writers developed such arguments explicitly and at length; others made only passing reference. Just as most texts from this period could be read as commenting in some way upon "modernity," so it is difficult to find an author who does not at some point offer a classical comparison or allusion; the influence of the literature and history of Greece and Rome was pervasive, and the influence of more general, non-specialist conceptions of "antiquity" was more pervasive still. A complete account of the confrontation of antiquity and modernity is clearly an impossible task; but, rather than concentrate solely on writers like Marx and Nietzsche, who comment extensively on the relation between ancient and modern, I have sought to draw in a wider range of authors and texts by organizing the material around themes. The selection has been driven partly by my sense of which writers in different disciplines have played the most important roles in the development of ideas of modernity – inevitably a subjective decision, in the absence of a comprehensive history of the concept – and partly by my judgment of which writers have the most interesting things to say on specific topics. I have little doubt that my selection, and the relative weight given to different texts and authors, will be a significant point of criticism, and my only defense is that I seek to identify themes and raise questions of potential significance rather than to offer a definitive account.

The other obvious objection is that, as an ancient historian, I am inclined to place far too much weight on passing references and commonplace allusions which simply reflect the dominance of the classics in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century education, rather than making any coherent attempt at conceptualizing modernity. This is of course possible, and may at any rate serve as a counterweight to the tendency of some modern commentators to ignore the classical references altogether. I do not claim that any but a few of these writers deliberately sets out to delineate modernity through the contrast with antiquity. Rather, they make such comparisons quite naturally and casually in the course of their discussions; these references may be taken, at the very least, as revealing their conceptions and assumptions, and so used as a way into the debate. However, I think they also reveal something else. The conviction that modernity exists and that we inhabit it, a conviction which above all expresses a sense of our location within and relation to history, was not the creation of any individual writer but is the effect of a continuing discourse, which is both reflected in these fragments and allusions and also, in part, constituted by them. They reveal a pervasive habit of drawing comparisons between ancient and modern and of understanding the present in terms of its difference from the past. Classical antiquity was chosen for the comparison above all because it was familiar; it is an open question as to whether another piece of the past might have served the same purpose, or whether the particular nature of classical antiquity as it was known and imagined – the blend of similarity and difference, or perhaps its susceptibility to being reimagined in the light of the present – made it especially suitable.

My interest in the place of the writings of Marx and Weber in the history of antiquity, and vice versa, predates my arrival at the University of Bristol, but it does not seem especially likely that this interest would have led to anything resembling this book if it had been left to its own devices in a less hospitable environment. Over the last decade I have enjoyed innumerable conversations and arguments about issues of reception and the classical tradition with colleagues like Catharine Edwards, Katherine Harloe, Duncan Kennedy, Aleka Lianeri, Charles Martindale, and Liz Potter; I have had the opportunity, with minimal effort, to encounter visiting scholars like Will Batstone, Jim Porter, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Hayden White, and to attend conferences and seminars on such themes as “Decadence Ancient and Modern” and “The Uses of

Reception"; I have had the immense pleasure of working in a department where exploring the relationship between ancient and modern and drawing on modern critical theory (and without any dogmatism as regards the choice of theoretical perspective) is regarded as entirely normal and unremarkable. All this has not only helped me to extend, develop, and refine my original interests, but given me the confidence to make them the focus of a study rather than just footnotes in more conventional historical work. Above all, I should like to thank Vanda Zajko, with whom over several years I taught a unit on "Antiquity and Modernity," exploring classical influences on Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud; besides the fact that this was one of the most stimulating and enjoyable teaching experiences of my career so far, many of the key ideas and arguments in this work were first developed in discussions and debates both in and about those classes.

This is a book built on other books. My role has, at times, felt less like that of a writer of history – a comprehensive account of the development of the idea of "modernity" and its relation to "antiquity" within different national and disciplinary traditions is far beyond the scope of this work – than like that of the organizer and chair of a large international conference. I have selected the subject and the contributors, and within certain limits have the power to decide how topics should be addressed and who should address them. I can ask, say, Schiller to respond to Weber, and can try to encourage the more eminent contributors to address specific questions rather simply reiterating their familiar positions; all this in the hope that the event will amount to more than the sum of its parts, and that new ideas and perspectives will emerge from the record of discussion. I would therefore like to acknowledge those whose ideas have particularly helped, in different ways, to inspire this gathering of distinguished thinkers: Marcel Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*; David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*; Reinhard Koselleck's *Futures Past*; the works of George E. McCarthy on classical influences in nineteenth- and twentieth century German thought; James I. Porter's *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*; Bernard Yack's *The Longing for Total Revolution*. These books, along with the Bristol Classics Department, constitute a context that made this work possible.

Naturally I also have more practical debts: to seminar and conference audiences in Berlin, Bristol, Cambridge, Copenhagen, Glasgow, Manchester, and St Andrews, who commented on earlier versions of some of these ideas; to Alfred Bertrand at Blackwell and the readers of the original book

proposal, for their exceptionally constructive and helpful comments and suggestions; to friends and colleagues like Gillian Clark and Bob Fowler, for continuing support and encouragement; to Angharad, whose conversation can be counted upon to illuminate and enliven; and, as ever, to Anne, for all her support, understanding and patience.

Note on References

For ease of reading, the various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings which are the subject of this study are referred to in the notes using the "short title" system, and listed in the Bibliography of Sources; references to modern works are given according to the Harvard "author–date" system.

Par ce qui c'est fait considérons ce qui se peut faire.

Through what has been done, let us consider what can be done.
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract*

Denn ich wüsste nicht, was die classicher Philologie in unserer Zeit für einen Sinn hätte, wenn nicht den, in ihr unzeitgemäss – das heist gegen die Zeit und dadurch auf die Zeit und hoffentlich zu Gunsten einer kommenden Zeit – zu wirken.

For I do not know what meaning classical studies would have in our time if not that of working in their untimeliness – that is to say, against our time and thereby on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come.
Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life"

1

Untimely Knowledge

Antonio Gramsci, the twentieth-century Italian communist theoretician, may seem an unlikely defender of the benefits of a classical education. Nevertheless, like many radical thinkers of the previous century, he had followed a traditional curriculum in school and university, specializing in Latin and Greek grammar as well as linguistics and geography; like them, he drew from this education some surprising conclusions, using it as a basis for thinking about different aspects of contemporary society.[1] In late 1930, four years into his imprisonment under Mussolini, he turned his thoughts to the subject of the Fascist reform of the Italian educational system:

> Schools were thus divided into classical and technical (vocational but not manual) schools, which called into question the very principle of the pursuit of general culture, of a humanistic orientation, of a general culture based on the classical tradition. This pursuit, once questioned, can be said to be destroyed, since its formative capacity was largely based on the general prestige enjoyed by a particular form of civilization. The tendency today is to abolish every type of school that is "disinterested" (in other words, not motivated by immediate interests) and "formative," or else to leave only a scaled-down specimen of such a school for a tiny elite of rich persons and young ladies who need not bother with preparing themselves for the future.[2]

> In the old school, then, the organizational structure itself provided an education. How? The study of Latin and Greek and other languages, together with the study of their respective literatures and political histories, was at the base of this mode of education. Its educative character came from the fact that these things were not learned for an immediate practical–professional purpose . . . One doesn't learn Latin and Greek in order to speak them, to become a waiter, or an interpreter, or whatever. One learns them

> in order to know the civilizations of Greece and Rome, whose existence is posited as a foundation of world culture. Latin or Greek is learned by way of grammar, somewhat mechanically; but the charges of mechanistic aridity are greatly exaggerated. This issue concerns children; they should be made to acquire certain habits of diligence, precision, physical composure, mental concentration on particular objects. Would a thirty- or forty-year-old scholar be able to sit at a desk for sixteen hours on end if, as a child, he had not acquired "compulsorily," through "mechanical coercion," the appropriate psycho-physical habits? This is where one has to start if one also wants to bring up scholars, and pressure must be applied across the board in order to produce those thousands, or hundreds, or even just dozens of first-rate scholars that every civilization requires . . .
>
> Latin is learned, and it is analyzed down to its smallest basic units; it is analyzed as a dead thing. This is true, but every analysis carried out by a child is bound to be an analysis of a dead thing. Besides, one must not forget that, wherever Latin is studied in these ways, the life of the Romans is a myth that, to a certain extent, has already interested and still interests the child. The language is dead, it is dissected like a cadaver, it is true, but the cadaver comes back to life continually in the examples and the stories. Could one do the same with Italian? Impossible. No living language could be studied in the same way as Latin: it would be or *would seem* absurd. No child knows Latin when he starts to study it with this kind of analytic method. A living language could be known, and it would take just one child who knows it to break the spell: everybody would rush to the Berlitz school. Latin and Greek appear to the imagination like a myth, even for the teacher.[3]

Gramsci's discussion is one of many contributions to the long process of the revaluation of classical antiquity and its legacy. This was always a complicated issue; at least since the Renaissance, there has never been a time when classical knowledge has been wholly unproblematic, or when its value, and the nature of the benefits to be gained from acquiring such knowledge, could be taken for granted.[4] However, it is generally recognized that the value attached to the legacy of antiquity has come under particular scrutiny over the last century or so; at the very least, ideas about *why* knowledge of antiquity might be useful or relevant, and the degree to which these ideas are accepted within society at large, have changed radically. Gramsci notes the prevailing preference in the early twentieth century for an "instrumental" approach to education, one focused solely on the immediate interests (primarily material) of society, resulting in the abandonment or degrading of the study of the classics. Even in the nineteenth century, writers had begun to argue against the dominance

of classics in the educational system, in favor of lessons that were more obviously and directly useful to the mass of the population.[5] In the twentieth century the study of antiquity came rapidly to be seen as a luxury, scarcely relevant to present concerns, and this perception had direct implications for the place of classics in school and university education and in the culture at large.[6]

This can be seen as the triumph of "modern" over "ancient" knowledge, the closing stages of a conflict that dated back to at least the seventeenth century with William Temple's "Essay Upon the Ancient and Modern Learning" and the subsequent scholarly debate. Modern mathematics, natural history, medicine, theology, history, and philosophy all claimed to have accumulated insights that went beyond – if not far beyond – those offered by classical writers; in subsequent centuries, disciplines like economics, offering ways of making sense of the world of which the ancients had never conceived, added to the clamor against the overvaluation of inherited knowledge and tradition. Increasingly, "modern" became a term of unequivocal approbation, denoting relevance and importance, rather than a neutral temporal description; in science, and increasingly in other disciplines, the most recent insights were usually valued more highly than those which they replaced. Modern knowledge was manifestly more useful and effective, as it transformed the present in visible, overwhelmingly impressive ways through the application of science and the rational organization of society and economy. It was natural, then, that modern knowledge should be preferred to the knowledge inherited from antiquity, and that the study of the society that had produced the works of the ancient authors should seem less relevant to the needs of modern society.

This is a familiar story for classicists, as are the arguments that can be marshaled against this attitude; Gramsci's rejection of an instrumental, anti-humanistic approach to education, and even his recommendation of the study of the classics as a means of developing the "transferable skills" and discipline required for diligent scholarly work, find plenty of analogies in defenses of classical learning in more recent educational debates. However, it is Gramsci's *defense* of the importance of studying the classical world that seems most telling. What is striking is his insistence on the absolute lack of any connection between antiquity and the present. The study of antiquity is useful, he argues, because antiquity is entirely dead. Its languages are a useful medium for education precisely because they are no longer living; the world of antiquity can be used as a subject of analysis and debate because it has no connection with the present. "One

does not study Latin in order to learn Latin; it is studied in order to accustom children to studying, to analyzing a body of history that can be treated as a cadaver but returns continually to life"; however, this history, this reanimated society, does not have any relationship to the life of the present, but exists simply as a set of stories and examples, a collection of myths, that can capture the child's imagination. From this the child may learn the necessary skills to understand and criticize contemporary society, but there is nothing in the *content* of these stories that seems to have any bearing on the present, for all that they are "posited" as a foundation of world culture. In other words, Gramsci's defense of classical education shares the assumption of its detractors that knowledge of antiquity in and of itself is essentially irrelevant to understanding the present.

It was not simply that modern knowledge had gone beyond ancient; modern knowledge was relevant to the understanding of modern society in a way that classical learning could never be because modern society was radically different from that of any preceding period. Gramsci suggests that "in modern civilization all practical activities have become so complex and the sciences so intertwined with life that each activity tends to create a school for its own specialists."[7] This tendency to specialization is offered as an explanation for the decline of classics, but it could equally well serve as a justification for it; the nature of the modern world, and above all its complexity, is such that only modern knowledge is appropriate or adequate for its understanding. Classical learning speaks of and to a simpler world, which could be adequately comprehended as a whole by an individual without the need for the fragmentation of knowledge into diverse specialisms; antiquity itself was such a world, and so too were the medieval and Renaissance societies that had looked to the classics for answers. Under the conditions of the present, such worlds must seem either mythical or dead, absolutely separate from modernity.

From the nineteenth century onwards, the term "modern" became a marker no longer just of chronology, denoting a straightforward contrast with "ancient" or "medieval," but of quality, evaluated in almost invariably positive terms.[8] From this perspective, the science of the seventeenth century, the philosophy of the eighteenth, and the economy of the nineteenth could all be claimed as recognizably "modern" knowledge, in contrast to what had gone before. Further, there was a prevalent belief that all parts of "modern society" share in and reflect this quality of modernity; even if "modernity" is understood as primarily an economic phenomenon,