

Interpretation

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“Modernity is a problem” is the provocative starting point of Smith’s *Modernity and Its Discontents* (ix). Though acknowledging that modernity means many things, Smith’s point of departure is of “modernity as the site of a unique type of human being, one entirely unknown to the ancient and medieval worlds that I want to call the *bourgeois*” (ix). This focus seems to be based on the fact that the bourgeois way of life has been fully identified with America, and “our political regime—the regime dedicated to the pursuit of happiness—is beset with dissatisfaction” (x). The problem of modernity is therefore not only a matter of theoretical reflection but of some political urgency.

Modernity and Its Discontents is divided into four parts, with Part One, “Introduction,” and Part Four, a brief “Conclusion,” bookending the bulk of the book, which consists of a series of essays collected under Part Two, “Modernity,” and Part Three, “Our Discontents.” “Modernity” consists of eight chapters on significant themes in the works of Machiavelli, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Benjamin Franklin, Kant, and Hegel. These chapters seek to elucidate the development of the idea of progress as “the promise of an unprecedented form of liberation” (xi). This modernity, or indeed “modernities” as Smith notes, resulted in its doppelgänger, or “Counter-Enlightenment” (xii). Part Three, “Our Discontents,” explores this antimodernity with eight chapters on Rousseau, Tocqueville, Flaubert, the “apocalyptic imagination” (Nietzsche, Sorel, Schmitt), Isaiah Berlin, Leo Strauss, Lampedusa, and Saul

Bellow. As each chapter is to some extent self-contained and can be read independently, the book for some will be seen as a collection of elegant and thoughtful essays that engage deeply with a thinker or a theme. The book's two epigraphs seem to anticipate such an approach. As such these essays are a testament to the impressive breadth and erudition of Smith's scholarship that felicitously ranges across politics, philosophy, religion, and literature.

Yet these essays, taken together, are meant to serve a larger purpose, Smith's attempt to understand "modernity" and its "discontents" (the title echoing Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*: xiii). "The thesis that I develop in this book," Smith tells us, "is that modernity has created within itself a rhetoric of anti-modernity that has taken philosophical, literary, and political forms. How did the idea of the bourgeois, once considered virtually synonymous with the free and responsible individual, become associated with a kind of low-minded materialism, moral cowardice, and philistinism? It is this dialectic that I hope to explore" (xi). The great merit of the book is the extent to which the structure Smith adopts, a detailed and wide-ranging engagement with the various theoretical founders of modernity as well as its most telling critics, allows the reader to confront the question of modernity and its discontents. But this structure and approach also limit Smith's own reflections and observations on these major themes to a Preface (ix–xiv), Introduction, "Modernity in Question" (3–26), and a Conclusion, "Modernity and Its Doubles" (347–52). The book therefore is limited in the extent to which we gain an insight into Smith's unmediated and comprehensive insights on the question or problem of modernity. From the brief conclusion, we learn that what is generally considered the crisis of the West is for Smith "the very character of modernity as the site of manifold discontents" (348). These discontents have taken two broad forms. The first is the "political Left" (Kantian, Hegelian, Marxist) that endorses the Enlightenment but seeks better institutions to secure its ends (348). The second is the "Counter-Enlightenment" that has a radical, apocalyptic form that wants to overthrow it (de Maistre, Nietzsche, Sorel, Heidegger), a postmodernism that is in certain respects the "Enlightenment on steroids" (349), and a moderate form that seeks to sustain and correct it (Tocqueville, Berlin, and Strauss, as well as Oakeshott and Aron). Smith favors the Counter-Enlightenment in its moderate form, noting that the real problem lies in "progressivism" as a kind of "ersatz religious faith" and its origins in modern science and positivism (Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes) (350). It is the scepticism regarding progressivism, according to Smith, that has posed questions about the Enlightenment. Living with the competing strands of the Enlightenment and its counter "has

made the emancipatory power of reason and science increasingly illusory.” Yet Smith’s concluding words seem to discern benefits to this “double” aspect of modernity: “We remain perpetually gnawed at by our manifold discontents—and that is a good thing” (352).

To see the theoretical bases for these concluding observations we need to turn to the beginning of the book. Yet the brevity of treatment in the Preface and the Introduction means Smith’s stimulating insights into the character of modernity remain ambiguous or insufficiently explored. Consider, for example, two major questions prompted by the title of the book: What does Smith understand by modernity? What are its discontents?

Smith is aware of the complex nature of “modernity,” which “came to be associated with the sovereign individual as the unique locus of moral responsibility, the separation of state and civil society as distinct realms of authority, the secularization of society or at least the lessening of the public role of religion, the elevation of science and scientific forms of rationality as the standard for knowledge, and a political regime based on the recognition of rights as the sole basis of its legitimacy” (ix). Later, he observes, “Modernity considered here is hardly all of a piece. It might be more accurate to speak of modernities. It includes everything from liberal modernity that values tolerance, commerce, self-discovery to more ambitious plans for large scale social engineering, achieving of rationalist perfectionism, and the transformation of the nation-state into a world of federation or even a world state” (xi). In the introductory chapter he goes on to outline the various ways modernity has been understood, from scientific and philosophical innovations, wars of religion, and revolutions that entrenched equality and rights of man to artistic changes (4). This capacious or comprehensive definition of modernity, which he frequently also calls “Enlightenment,” is understandable given the breadth of thinkers examined and ideas explored in the book. At the same time, Smith seems unwilling to leave modernity and the Enlightenment at this level of generality. “Is the idea of modernity a coherent one?” (5) is the compelling question he poses. Yet the answer he provides proves to be ambiguous. For example, Smith makes a persuasive case that an important aspect of modernity is the idea of a “permanent revolution” or the idea of “progress” or “progressivism” (6–11). At the same time, however, he argues that modernity is above all characterized by the bourgeois, a new type of human being and a form of civilization that is criticized by the “Counter-Enlightenment” for its focus on science and commerce at the expense of culture (15–17). What is at the heart of modernity therefore remains elusive. Is there a constitutive core

to modernity that shapes and defines its peripheral aspects? Or is modernity constituted by modernities, related but distinct elements or strands that mostly reinforce but sometimes counter each other?

These questions are especially important for understanding Smith's diagnosis of modernity's "discontents" and more specifically his thesis, borrowing from Horkheimer and Adorno, that there is a "dialectic of Enlightenment" where "the critical spirit that had once been turned against the past would be turned against modernity itself, creating its own dissatisfaction with the present" (13). Because every thesis has its antithesis, "every Enlightenment produces its Counter-Enlightenment" (14). The Counter-Enlightenment did not seek to restore a world, "but to create a more accelerated form of the new" (14). Why the dialectic of the Enlightenment is not sublated, but instead accelerates and therefore exacerbates modernity, remains unclear in this account. Indeed, this insight into modernity seems to contend with Smith's other view of modernity as constituted by its "double" (20–23). Here he argues that the Enlightenment and its Counter-Enlightenment "are not so much antagonists as copartners in the modern project" (20). This view is presumably intended to explain the different strands in modernity, distinguishing between the nihilistic and bourgeois self-hating Counter-Enlightenment that embraces fascism and reactionary modernism from those strands informed above all by Tocqueville (and Strauss) which initiate a conversation with modernity to defend it (21–22). Yet on what basis one should choose one over the other remains unclear. What is evident, however, is that *Modernity and Its Discontents* is in the spirit of Tocqueville, seeking to discern important and fruitful areas of continuity and discontinuity between modernity and its doubles through engagement and conversation (23). In this task and ambition it succeeds admirably.