**The forces of modernization**

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**Social change**

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**Modernity**, the self-definition of a generation about its own technological [innovation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/innovation-creativity), governance, and socioeconomics. To participate in modernity was to conceive of one’s society as engaging in organizational and knowledge advances that make one’s immediate predecessors appear antiquated or, at least, surpassed. The eminent Victorians thus appeared old-fashioned to a new generation of “moderns” at the beginning of the 20th century, and the motto of poets of the time was to “make it new.”

More specifically, modernity was associated with individual subjectivity, scientific explanation and rationalization, a decline in emphasis on religious worldviews, the emergence of [bureaucracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bureaucracy), rapid [urbanization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/urbanization), the rise of nation-states, and accelerated financial exchange and communication. There is little [consensus](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consensus) as to when modernity began. Histories of Western Europe suggest that a modern era arrived at the end of colonial invasion and global expansion, which date to the 18th and early 19th centuries. In general, modernity was exemplified by the period subsequent to the onset of modern warfare, typified by two world wars and succeeded by [postmodernism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy).

**The Influence Of Innovation**

Modernity in the West in the first half of the 20th century meant new formats for new thoughts—innovative ways of writing and thinking, new fields of inquiry, the infusion of women into historically male-dominated workforces, the emergence of new art forms (e.g., [jazz](https://www.britannica.com/art/jazz) and silent film), and the development of new products and technologies. The rationalization of processes led to schemes such as the intensification of the [division of labour](https://www.britannica.com/topic/division-of-labour), which improved work [efficiency](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/efficiency) and provided work opportunities for semiskilled individuals. Indeed, the resulting revisions in workplace organization often displaced workers with established expertise, while at the same time introducing many workers to predictable, calculated workdays and providing them with the income to purchase the products they created. Assembly lines for automobiles, such as those instituted by American industrialist [Henry Ford](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Ford) and celebrated as egalitarian mergers of human and machine by Mexican painter [Diego Rivera](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diego-Rivera), embodied this approach, implying better practices and technologies for all. Ford’s manufacturing system greatly influenced the modern economy. Likewise, technological [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations) such as the telegraph and the advent of photography also altered modes of inhabiting [environments](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environments) and daily living for entire populations.



Many scholars of modernity agree that scientific methods serve neatly to mark a break between modern and ancient in that research designs precisely enable a new means for testing reality—from telescopes to electron microscopes, case notes, surveys, weights, and scales, along with systems for data analysis. Citizens in modernity were wise to the ways that scientific development resulted in means for destruction and population control alongside material improvements in the standards of daily living.

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**Decline Of Premodern Beliefs**

To operate within modernity also meant to participate in the belief that one finds bold contrast between modern [conceptions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conceptions) of the cosmos and the worldview of premoderns or “ancients.” In the field of philosophy, premodern beliefs yielded to modern dismay about how social systems determine a great deal of life experience for any one individual. German philosopher [Friedrich Nietzsche](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Friedrich-Nietzsche) proposed that modernity is typified by crises in systems of [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality), so that once belief is lost, there can be no restoration. He also noted that many of these crises in self-perception occur because of advancements in knowledge and an uncritical embrace of new technologies.

Technologies themselves participate in the decentring of human confidence in perception and planning. Modernity as a historical coordinate, a marker in a chronology of named epochs, depends on the distinction between new modes of existence as well as new perceptions of a self that attends to transport, architecture, mass events, and media that replace former ways of inhabiting space and experiencing time. Thus, some scholars will even go so far as to locate modernity with the advent of the [printing press](https://www.britannica.com/technology/printing-press) and the mass circulation of print information that brought about expanded literacy in a middle class during the 15th century.

Prevalently cited examples in which technological advance contributed to the dissolution of premodern beliefs include microscopes and cameras, which replaced the [human eye](https://www.britannica.com/science/human-eye) as an arbiter of evaluation, and laboratory heredity tests, which can prove parentage with or without testimony. Cameras can capture discrete elements of an activity and therefore offer a vantage point that is potentially superior to that of the human eye. English photographer [Eadweard Muybridge](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eadweard-Muybridge), a pioneer in the photographic study of motion, combined scientific experimentation with photography in a series of chronophotographic demonstrations. He famously showed that at a specific moment, a trotting Standardbred horse is airborne, with all four legs off the ground. Muybridge’s photography captured a motion that had eluded the human eye. From a philosophical perspective, Muybridge’s work defined a boundary for the human perception of reality. Visual devices such as cameras and microscopes enabled individuals to survey and study mechanisms of function and dysfunction of objects and beings in new ways.

**Nation-States, Financial Exchange, And Communication**

Modernity was also characterized by a shift in governance, in which distant colonizing powers yielded to governance by local powers. Thus, the boundaries of nation-states were perceived to reflect oversight by resident officials as opposed to colonial military powers.

With a growing global practice of commodity [capitalism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/capitalism), with capital’s requisite ventures to open up consumer markets, modernity also became associated with increasing speed, both in the transport of financial exchanges and in cross-border communications. Indeed, modernity was associated with the rapid-pace movement of global capital, satellite transmission of images, and immediate transglobal communication. Despite those developments, however, modernity also came to define savage inequities on a global scale, from industries run for the profit of invisible shareholders to cultural biases in the provision of public education.