Western conceptions of modernity continue the active disempowerment of societies that are the focus of modernization projects. By usurping the ability to define for societies their own notion of what progress and development mean, the making of the modern is a project that has systemically inserted its power into the very way individuals outside the West define themselves and their desires. As Robert Meister writes, “oppression is ultimately a matter of having the meaning of one’s life interpreted in a language that is not one’s own: to be oppressed is, thus, in the first instance to be misunderstood: all other social misfortune is a consequence of oppression if and only if it can be traced to this misrecognition of one’s identity.”¹ In this sense, the project of modernization defined as the constant attempt to interpret and transform the ontology of the other is a project of oppression.

In the dominant Western episteme of modernity, to give a society value is to measure its embrace of the significations of modernity, especially the rationality of its culture. We see that the debate around what is the modern is particular to the logic of Western reality. What this evaluation disallows is multiple forms of reasoning—that there might be other rationalities that have their own logic, rules, or laws. Lisa Rofel suggests, “Modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge, forged within uneven categories of otherness.”² In this
framework, we have to see the premodern in order to see the modern. There are signposts that evoke this difference. Modernity acts as a signifier of progress, describing movement away from a set of characteristics that are found outside of the geographic, temporal and affective evocations of the modern.

I am compelled to deal with the figuration of the modern because of my concerns regarding the violence that occurs during the processes of remaking societies in the image of the West in the name of modernization and development. I argue that, as both concept and phenomenon, modernity can be conceived of as a sign that is used in multiple ways to legitimate the material imbuement of the characterizations of modernity onto spaces and peoples lacking the sign of the modern. Although modernity becomes a material practice in the translation of the concept into the work of states and institutions that perform modernization programs, I want to examine three different ways in which modernity has been explored, particularly as a concept.

The first section of this piece will explore the classical theorists of the 18th and 19th centuries and the relevance of this body of literature to creation of the binary between the modern and the pre-modern. I argue that the discipline of political theory reinscribes a legacy for thinking about modernization, and the classical theorists help map out the ways in which modernity has been configured. The second section will look at theoretical critiques from the mid-twentieth century that have transformed the questions that are asked around the notion of modernity. The third section will include a set of post-colonial critiques that challenge and push the disciplinary boundaries that have shaped the way in which modernity has been conceived and critiqued, specifically in regards to constructs of tradition and temporality.
Section I: Creating the Modern: Rationality, Individuality, and Social Contract

The texts of classical political literature set up modernity as a conceptual phenomenon that has a distinct emergence point in history. The narrative that has been created by the classical literature in authors such as Weber, Marx, Hegel and Kant forms an intellectual heritage for the ways in which modernity as a material phenomenon is understood. Authors of the 19th century who seek to define the modern act as producers of the characterizations of modernity and reinforce the idea that there is a tangible set of identifications encapsulated in the modern. These characteristics include a normative binary between rationality and emotion, the rise and agency of individuality, the establishment of economism as the preeminent principle around which society is organized, and an awareness of historicity. Used to separate from the non-modern, these characteristics serve as the background against which the modern emerges in relief and provide legitimacy for the remaking of societies outside of the West into the image of modernity. Defining the characteristics that embody the modern will lead back to the era of Enlightenment, at which time the particular forms of social and political struggle mingled with new knowledge formations that set the stage for the modern moment to be distinguished from the pre-modern. This examination reveals that the progress narrative is characterized by reshaping the slave-object in the image of the master-subject, where labor fuels the notion of emancipation of the individual and society. In the master-slave dialectic, we can recognize the characteristics that fuel the transition towards modernity and the supposed natural improvement of man.
Weber’s Assertion of the Modern: Rationality Trumps Reason

According to classical political theory, rationality is the most critical signpost of modernity, linking this element of Western epistemology as necessary to the creation of the material institutions of modernity. These institutions include the social contract, capitalism, property, and legitimation of state control based on protecting these institutions. However, the linkages that are made between the rational characteristics of society and these institutions are overdetermined. In addition, modernity as described by classical theorists tries to universalize a particular form of reason as rationality, which it then naturalizes.

Within the classical reference system, the modern subject is defined as a rational being, who employs his tools of consciousness to observe himself and his place in the world. His success in the world is possible through utilization of his rational mind that allows him to transform his world into an environment that will bring the highest degree of satisfaction. As this narrative is told, the emergence of the rational man can be witnessed as a historical phenomenon. During the Enlightenment, there was a crisis of political and religious authority, as the power of the church shrunk through the development of scientific rationality and the protestant movement spurred by Martin Luther³, leading eventually towards the Thirty Years War. When religion falls during the Enlightenment and continues to plummet in its explanatory power during the modern era, man must find a new source for the direction of his life. Man as modern man is the center of the world, though God remains relevant because he has given man reason. Reason creates knowledge; therefore, those who are unreasonable or irrational are without God.
This irrationality characterizes the non-modern, those who have not experienced what Weber has termed in “Science as Vocation” as the “disenchantment of the world”. When the break with the pre-modern occurs, the world no longer has inherent, God-inscribed meaning. Weber asserts, “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world.” ⁴ With the Enlightenment and the establishment of liberal thought, knowledge, virtue and truth can only be found in the empirical world, outside of irrational, sacred forms of knowledge. The epistemology of modern man is imagined through rational knowledge, replacing irrational, sacred-based and culturally specific explanations of the functioning of the world. Classical political theory calls upon the intellectual and moral superiority of the rational episteme to explain the reorganization of society that occurred during the Enlightenment period and beyond. This reorganization legitimates new forms of legal and policing structures, and is reflected in the disintegration of communally-based into contract-based interactions.

Maine and Weber: The Making of the Modern Through the Social Contract

By necessitating the conception of the enlightened polity upon the rational individual and the protection of private property, normative concepts such as equality, freedom and flourishing are intertwined with the exercise of state control and growth of market-based organization of society. Beyond enabling a new sort of relationship between individuals, the contract is the mechanism that allows a bargain to be set between the rational individual and the state, where the state is depicted as the benevolent protector of the individual in society and the fruit of his labor. As Maine explains, the
modern can be distinguished from the pre-modern in the notions of status versus contract. During the pre-modern era, subjects and knowledges were produced in relation to one another in a static, unmoving web of relationships. In the modern era, there is a shift from kinship networks to contractual relationships, which are premised upon the individual. Maine writes, “[Archaic law] is full, in all its provinces, of the clearest indications that society in primitive times was not what it is assumed to be at present, a collection of individuals. In fact, and in the view of the men who composed it, it was an aggregation of families. The contrast may be most forcibly expressed by saying that the unit of an ancient society was the Family, of a modern society the Individual.”

Progress is discerned from the historical movement through the stages of establishing legal contract, premised upon the rational individual.

The contract extricates the free, rational individual from the static bonds of pre-modern relational organization. This extrication occurs over time with the establishment of jurisprudence. Lawrence Rosen has written that Maine asserts, “Over the course of time, particularly as the result of elite domination of the legal order, opportunities were afforded individuals to transmit their property and arrange their economic ties on a personal, contractual basis rather than as representatives of a corporate group.”

The contract is only possible as a relationship between two rational, actional individuals. In “Character of Asiatic Religion”, Weber argues that mysticism and its otherworldly focus leads away from rationalization and the economic organization that signify the modern era. The agential individual, armed with the tools of rationality and disembedded from the kinship structures that would have previously kept him mired in traditional, stagnant patterns of living, is able to have a new relationship to his world and
his God. In Weber’s explanation of the Protestant ethic, there is a change in subjectivity, in which the individual is able to have an active relationship with God, unmediated by the Catholic Church.

The individual is able to utilize his tools of rationality and agency to decipher his position of salvation or condemnation in the eyes of God. Through “intense worldly activity”, he is able to see if he is blessed through his efforts at achieving wealth and prosperity, where his wealth gives him some assurance that he is a success in God’s eyes. Weber writes, “As far as the influence of the Puritan outlook extended, under all circumstances—and this is, of course, much more important than the mere encouragement of capital accumulation—it favored the development of a rational bourgeois economic life; it was the most important, and above all the only consistent influence in the development of that life. It stood at the cradle of the modern economic man”.

Hobbes, Locke and Kant: Enlightenment-era Beginnings of the Social Contract

Although, during the 19th century, states and associated legal structures employ the notion of the contract to enforce property and rights in a manner that elicits the modern moment, the idea of the social contract is evident in theorists of the Enlightenment. By explaining the phenomenology of the social contract through the work of earlier political theorists, the narrative of modernity gains greater legitimacy. The discipline of political theory calls upon authors such as Hobbes and Locke to explain the universal rational individual who enters into a contract with the state, an authority outside of sacred legitimation. Locating the establishment of the contract during the
Enlightenment but as a critical element to the modern moment concretizes the feeling of temporally contiguous developments through the Western progress narrative.

Writing during the late 17th century, a period of major shifts in Europe regarding the role of the church and state in the ruling of society, Hobbes establishes a theory of authoritarian legitimacy via explanations of rational and violent human nature in *The Leviathan*. The work of Hobbes highlights the role of rationality in the narrative of social contract and state control. He does not offer justification of divine right, instead basing the legitimacy of the monarch on a contract that had come from a rational choice made by society, giving greater strength to the burgeoning landowners who want to assert their political autonomy outside that of the king.

The Hobbesian narrative of human nature threads its way through the explanation of modernity in an extremely fixed manner. Hobbes characterizes the essence of being human as self-interested, asocial, and equal. In the state of nature, we are all equal, where for Hobbes equality is concrete, not moral. In physical terms, no one is so much more powerful than another that someone else cannot defeat him. As such, no one stands above another to such an extent that he is invulnerable—we are all unsafe in nature. The argument Hobbes raises is, that given these characteristics of individuals in a state of nature, humans are naturally in a state of conflict.

Hobbes argues that we should try to live without conflict but, given the nature of the individual, someone will try to take what is yours, and as there exists in nature the right to defend ourselves, to survive, there will be conflict. Dominated by conflict, there is continuous, all-pervasive fear; before the instantiation of a common power, there is continual war, every man against every man. In this condition, there is no place for
society, art or industry because the result of any kind of work is uncertain due to the continual fear of violent death. No progress or material betterment is possible because these things presuppose a state of human cooperation. Life, pervaded by fear, is “nasty, brutish and short”.

From this description of humans driven by fear, in their natural environment and with too much freedom, arises the Hobbesian notion of the social contract and civil society. As freedom for Hobbes means that men can do whatever they want to do, without restraint, or rules, Hobbes does not maintain that freedom is the highest good, because it has potential to lead to unending conflict. Individuals choose to sacrifice freedom for self-preservation and security. The sovereign is necessary so that the institutions of private property and the individual self, stripped of all relationships that might provide a sense of community or security, can be protected. The sovereign stands above the law and subjects have no right to question his authority. If you are disruptive, the sovereign has the right and the obligation to squash you.

The social contract, as Hobbes describes it, is not only based on fear, it is also based on reason. While he maintains that we all ruled by passion, there is also a kernel of reason that allows men to reflect on their condition and consider that they might be able to do better. A rational society would conclude that it might behoove us to create a ruler who can control people enough so that people’s existence will be ensured. From the Hobbesian account, there is an explanation for why modern society agrees to a contract under which the right and freedom to do everything is relinquished in exchange for security. Rationality, one of most elementary characteristics of modernity, encourages
moderns to give up freedoms that are then placed in the hands of the state, who will make the law and guarantee order will be preserved.

From Hobbes, a chapter in the modernization narrative of classical political theory is written. *Leviathan*, a standard part of the canon, stands as one of the most widely-read accounts that naturalizes how human beings at essence act towards one another, and legitimizes the need for a protective and policing state on behalf of the protection of private property. This brutish, selfish violence that for Hobbes describes the state of nature, an amorphous time and place in which a system of rule and law does not exist. Such a description is used to discern the characteristics of the pre-modern, a category that within the narrative of modernity is ascribed a particular temporality and geographic location.

Born a generation after Hobbes, Locke built upon the theories posited in *Leviathan* with an important distinction regarding the construction of the social contract. Like Hobbes, Locke argues that human nature is characterized by self-interest, rationality, equality and freedom, and emphasizes that, in moderation, the attempt by an individual to pursue self-interest is fundamental and may be beneficial to grander society. Rationality is critical to Locke, as this form of reasoning is argued to be the key that sets us apart from animals, and allows us to cooperate with one another in a manner that will encourage human flourishing.

Freedom for Locke means that we are free in a non-constrained sense, but in a state of nature, this freedom is incomplete. Unlike Hobbes’ view, in which society restrains freedom, Locke says we could be freer outside of the state of nature through the imposition of a social contract. In a polity organized by a social contract, there are rules
that improve our lives. Improvement and industry are encouraged when property is allocated away from the common domain. The existence of social order through the creation of legally enforced contracts enlarges our chances for fulfillment and satisfaction and thereby increases our freedoms. Hobbesian and Lockean premises that link rationality, the essence of human beings as concerned with private property, and the need to bound freedoms with the protection of the state reinforce the characterizations of modern society that run through the narrative of modernization found throughout classical political theory.

Kant, another canonical figure in classical literature, argues that man can only enjoy and realize freedom by understanding where it is restrained. This particular argument further instantiates the role of the state in protection of the individual and his property as elemental to a modern society. Kant describes the Enlightenment as a period in social evolution characterized by the extension and creation of rationally-based knowledge, a moment exemplifying “human nature, whose original destiny lies precisely in such progress.” During this era, mankind is progressing in its maturity, signified by a release of society from the grasp of the “guardians” of information, who restrict the freedom of members of society to establish their own voice regarding their affairs of existence. These guardians include the members of religious institutions who were empowered with the ability to interpret the world and man’s place in it using sacred forms of knowledge, which has been part of the story that characterizes the pre-modern.

However, according to Kant, the maturation of the individual, though encouraged to wriggle from the heavy hand of these guardians, does not depend upon his complete escape from the palm of the institutional mechanisms that determine the smooth flow of
society. For example, the soldier should not “quibble openly, while on duty, about the appropriateness or usefulness of the order in question…The citizen cannot refuse to pay the taxes imposed upon him; presumptuous criticism of such taxes, where someone is called upon to pay them, may be punished as an outrage which could lead to general insubordination.” Kant explains that the soldier and the citizen are encouraged to express themselves, to exercise their individuated reason in a public setting, but not to upset the workings of the private mechanisms into which they fit as a functioning member of society. If people have unbridled civil freedoms, there can be only anarchy, and no one can exercise freedom. For Kant, the state allows the articulation of freedom by the rational individual.

Kant, like Hobbes and Locke, reinforces the notion that the creation of the contract allows men to engage in a relationship with the state in a manner which encourages protection of property and legitimizes capitalism as the dominant form of progress within the narrative of modernization. Capitalism, which “can be defined as a social system based on the profit motive and the dominance of commodity relations, including the commodification of labor” constructs a particular definition of human nature and an associated social ethos. This socio-economic system lauds certain freedoms: of choice, to improve one’s life, and from social obligation.

The reorganization of European society during the Enlightenment and continuing into the characterization of the modern era is premised upon the rational, agential individual who is imbued with the freedom to engage in economistic activities that will encourage progress. This freedom is particularly formulated in the descriptions of the canonical theorists, and only available to those who hold the characteristics of rationality.
The construction of modernity upon notions of rationality forms the premise for imagining the pre-modern. The absence of rationality, then, evident in societies stuck in mystical epistemes, means the absence of contract, and the absence of social control.

**Hegel, Mill and Marx: Locating the Pre-modern in Time and Space**

In the 19th century, taxonomies of people and the notion that certain characteristics mark those groups which are not yet liberated, not fully conscious emerge. The non-modern subject embedded within a population or category that has not achieved the sensibility of individualism creates perversions and requires increased policing, or warrants the active maturation by forces outside of itself, as Hegel, Mill and Marx have argued.

For Hegel, the non-West is critical to understand how far ahead the West has come. Progress has occurred in the West, signified by this moment of the modern, and has not in the non-West. Hegel responds to both the Enlightenment thinkers of the 17-18th century and the Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th century. While he agrees with the Enlightenment tenets of reason and free, equal individuals, he is critical of the universalistic claims of the Enlightenment that would seemingly include all peoples in all spaces under its rubric of rational individuals. In Enlightenment thinking, the qualities of freedom and equality are arguably present in the state of nature, or non-Westernized societies. Hegel asserts that societies evolve—freedom is something at which an individual or a nation must arrive.

Hegel carries the thread of the classical narrative of modernity, specifically describing the stages through which societies must progress in order to reach modernity.
The attainment of freedom is possible only in a rational state, a process that is only happening in the west. He writes, “The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning…The History of the World is the discipline of the uncontrolled natural will, bringing it into obedience to a Universal principle and conferring subjective freedom.” This is the modernizing process: turning the chaotic essence of man as described by Hobbes into an obedient, non-sovereign being, where the meaning of freedom has been perversely warped.

Modernity as Hegel describes it is an evolutionary force that wields power and control at the levels of knowledge creation, identities, and material life. In speaking of the stages of development that vary from lower to higher stages of societal maturation, he claims,

Every intermediate grade between this and the realization of rational State retains—as might be expected—elements and aspects of injustice; therefore we find slavery even in the Greek and Roman States, as we do serfdom down to the latest times. But thus existing in a State, slavery is itself a phase of advancing from the merely isolated sensual existence—a phase of education—a mode of becoming a participant in a higher morality and the culture connected with it. Slavery is in and for itself injustice, for the essence of humanity is Freedom, but for this man must be matured.

This conception differs from early liberal contract theorists of the Enlightenment, who assume that we are already individuals, rational and free, and upon the basis of that, we can create society and economic relations. Locke argues that even pre-modern people have contracts, that property and the individual are there before society, even in pre-political spaces.

For Mill, as well as for Hegel, the individual is situated singularly in the West. Mill, in questioning the limits that should be place upon an individual operating within
the social contract, offers a particular view of the individual. At first glance, Mill wants much less restriction placed upon the individual than that for which Hobbes or Locke might argue. He writes, “The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part that merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” However, this freedom can only apply to those who are in maturity of their faculties and are matured individuals. Children and colonial people, for example, cannot make rational decisions, hence, this freedom cannot be granted, and particular kinds of rules must be in place for these groups. Mill writes,

It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by other, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage. The early difficulties in the way of spontaneous progress are so great, that there is seldom any choice of means for overcoming the and a ruler full of the spirit of improvement is warranted in the use of any expedients that will attain an end, perhaps otherwise unattainable.

Mill portrays the non-modern as without the sensibilities of the modern individual, who must then be governed through particular, paternalistic systems of rule. However, though lacking the qualities of a fully developed conscious human, the modern individual can be created by the modern state. The imbueont of individuality, rationality and modernity are evident in the colonizing of India as described by Marx—an export of modernity. Like Hegel, Marx implies that the non-West will stagnate until the West enters. According to Marx, the non-West can progress towards being modern; it is
possible to posit development via a shift in material conditions, with the assistance of the West—a grounding of Hegel.

In writing of the British colonization of India, Marx makes a gesture towards the violence that occurred to the Indian communities and traditions, but excuses the enacted societal dissolution as necessary to bringing about a social and productive revolution in the non-Western colony. He argues,

We must not forget that this undignified, stagnant, and vegetative life...that these little communities...subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing in natural destiny...The question is, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution...England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, and the other regeneration—the annihilation of old Asiatic society and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.  

The concept of modernity is made material in the institutional practices of slavery and colonization. The classical texts of political theory justify such practices as part of bringing the undeveloped non-modern into a liberated position. Returning again to the ideational plane, the master-slave dialectic is another canonical explanation of the transformation of the old social order, or the subjugated positionality, fueled by the agency of the slave who transform himself into the image of the master in order to become modern.

**Master-Slave Dialectic: Adoption of Modernity as Emancipation**

Hegel produces a standard of measurement against which to measure the rest of the world against, having claimed that the spirit which moves societies and individuals through the dialectic of progress was born and has been fully realized only in the West.
However, the non-West can be prompted onto a course of becoming modern through emulation of the characteristics of modernity, a process described in the master-slave dialectic.

Hegel offers a description of how the modern is made in the non-West by reshaping the slave-object in the image of the master-subject. The slave, in moving through this process, receives the spirit of liberation, emancipation and recognition that makes him part of the modern. To recognize in this sense is to see a sameness in another, the same as self, and to see the same as another person. This sameness is based upon an image of the modern that is white, obeys a particular form of reasoning, and follows a pattern of social organization that elevates utility, production and individualism above all else.

The master-slave story begins with the thesis involving two individuals who are conscious that satisfaction is dependent upon the recognition by the other of the subject position’s needs. In this interaction, there is a struggle for recognition, and the one who fears death more becomes a slave as a way of surviving. The subjugated slave must recognize the master’s dominance, recognize his needs and provide for their satisfaction. He also desires the master’s position, and in this moment, the master attains freedom from his desire for recognition.

The antithesis occurs when the slave is able to shift his position and become equal to the master, finding another medium for self-recognition through his labor. Through his ability to transform nature in a manner that allows him to provide for his own needs through work, the slave frees himself from the fear of death as the ultimate master. Because he has gained freedom from the disempowered position of one dependent upon
external beings to satisfy his needs, the slave moves into a position of master over his own needs. Synthesis occurs when both the master and slave are able to recognize one another in a moment of mutuality and equality. Hegel seems to say that this final moment of mutual recognition also entails a sense of equality between the two individuals, where neither needs to subjugate the other for recognition and there is a free-flow of respect. This moment of synthesis occurs at an ideational level, but supposes that socio-political institutions will be transformed because of the shift within the individual.

In the master-slave dialectic, the characterizations of the modern as described within the classical literature are evident as the elements that propel the progress of the individual and society. Hegel wants to relate the production of our selves as subjects capable of developing an interiorized conception of self as a subject and object in the world. By being both subjectified and having objects in the world we gain consciousness. The dialectic of self-consciousness ends in a synthesis of liberation from the desire for recognition and an end to struggle. At this ending point, the modern individual in modern society is born. Hegel sought to establish how, in modern society, the tension between what we want as a result of our subjective desires and what we get due to the limits to need-satisfaction in an organized society propels the movement of history. The bondage that an individual experiences from unmet desire in an embodied mind which experiences the duality of being both subject and object may be reversed in the dialectical process.

As implied by Marx and Hegel, becoming modern entails a process of transformation, premised upon the notion that there is a desire, whether intrinsic to the
conscious human being or which must be externally inculcated, to become modern. According to Hegel, with the tools of rationality to explore and control parts of his world, history is propelled, and the transformation from slave to equal standing with the master is possible through the slave becoming aware of his power through his labor. Labor is the catalyst that propels history and the progress of mankind towards emancipation and freedom. Primarily, the master-slave is a description of the manner in which classical political theory creates the modern subject, premised upon the liberal Enlightenment application of scientific rationality through labor.

Weber, Marx, Hegel, Maine, and Mill, believe that Western society has moved from a position of the pre-modern, the unenlightened, the backward, the primitive, to a place of improved standing, and this improvement is encapsulated in the modern. To be modern is to experience the newfound confidence that through agency, humankind can achieve the possibilities of freedom and the emancipation inherent in human activity. At the same time, being modern includes maintaining an awareness of the past and the ability to trace movement through time that has led to the modern moment, signifying progress. Being modern is possible only through comparison between what is now, and what was then within a linear trajectory.

In this temporal comparison, there is an implication of improvement and a teleological, naturalized movement. History holds a promise of improvement, connoting progress and linearity. In the social evolutionary context of the 19th century during which the idea of modernity emerged, this bifurcation is particularly clear. George Stocking Jr. writes,

In the beginning, black savages and white savages had been psychologically one. But while white savages were busily acquiring superior brains in the course of
cultural progress, dark-skinned savages had remained back near the beginning. Although united in origin with the rest of mankind, their assumed inferiority of culture and capacity now reduced them to the status of missing links in the evolutionary chain. Their cultural forms, although at the center of anthropological interest, had still only a subordinate interest. One studies these forms not for themselves, or in terms of the meaning they might have to the people who created them, but in order to cast light on the processes by which the ape had development into the British gentleman.\textsuperscript{16}

Modern political theorists change the question from “how do we become modern?” to “what are the effects of the transformation to modernity?”.\textsuperscript{17} 20\textsuperscript{th} century critics of the classical theorists engage the notion of modernity through questioning the process of becoming modern.

\textbf{Section II: Disruptive Modernity: Economism, Utility, and Tradition}

Alan Richards has chastised the smugness of modernity, writing, “Much of the ‘discourse of modernity’ will not withstand serious intellectual scrutiny and stands revealed as political ideology. Too often it simply becomes justification for the exercise of arbitrary, unilateral power, relieving us of any possible guilty conscience that our ignorant meddling in the affairs of others might otherwise stimulate.”\textsuperscript{18} Authors of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century question the ways that concretization of the characteristics of modernity serve to solidify a position of power through the normalization of progress, which places the Western self at the top of a hierarchical ordering of the world.

Foucault, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that modernity is a construction that enables and ensures the success of the western self. They demonstrate that the legacy of the Enlightenment that has elevated rationalism, individuality, and economism as the most valid forms of knowledge for the efficient management of social life is a project of governmentality. Polanyi critiques the process of modernization as a process of capital development, arguing against the violence that occurs in the name of progress. Fanon
pushes the idea of material violence described by Polanyi to an ontological level, demonstrating that the master-slave transformation encourages the subjugated to morph into a modern being. Becoming modern is premised upon the internalization of the characteristics of both modernity and whiteness. This transformation, Elias argues, is a “civilizing process”, in which the savage barbaric outside is taught the proper mannerisms of not only modernity, but of humanity itself.

**Foucault, Horkheimer and Adorno: The Power of an Episteme**

Within the reference system established by the classical literature on political theory, the modern subject is defined as a rational being, who employs his tools of consciousness to observe himself and his place in the world to decipher the problems that lie in the path of his progress. His success in the world is possible through utilization of his rational mind that allows him to transform the world into an environment that will bring the highest degree of satisfaction. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault describes the way that pre-modern man understood his world, and poses a different angle for questioning what it means to be modern. Foucault describes the world that “state of nature” narratives depict as the pre-modern. As described by Weber, Marx and Hegel, and recalled by Foucault, people’s place in the world is the result of God’s will. The structures of social and political life are justified and determined by the divine. There is no human agency here because hierarchies are legitimized through divine right. God created the world and its meaning independent of man. Meaning is already in the world for men to retrieve. There was a distinct correlation between a word and the meaning of the world. Foucault writes that, during the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, “there
exists a greater world, and that its perimeter defines the limit of all created things; that at
the far extremity of this great world there exists a privileged creation which reproduces,
within its restricted dimensions, the immense order of the heavens, the stars, the
mountains, river and storms…”

Though the Bible explains to pre-modern man through
the story of Babel how mankind lost the original language that unified all men and God,
man can find the true properties of things in the signs left by God which mark all things.

Man, like the objects in his environment, is a text of God, and the interpretation of the
pre-modern world is about man discovering his true nature as God fashioned it.

As the narrative of classical political theory goes, the shattering of religious
power and the bloodletting of the Thirty Years War spurred philosophers such as
Descartes to fill the vacuum left by dogmatic religion and the reliance upon the clergy to
define ways of knowing. In this intellectual project for certainty, Newtonian physics and
mathematics rather than theology explain man and his environment. Enlightenment
thinkers asserts a new form of knowing which says the truth is out there and the
individual is able to make sense out of reality because of empirical observations. There is
a synthesis of a system of equations regarding motion and gravitation with the notion of
mathematics and the scientific method, which serves as the basis for a newfound sense of
agency. This epistem e reduces all ways of knowing into a singular model, separating
reason and emotion. Toulmin writes,

Issues of formal consistency and deductive proof thus came to have a special
prestige, and achieved a kind of certainty that other kinds of opinions could never
claim…The contrast between the reasonableness of narratives and the rigor of
formal proofs, between autobiography and geometry, is the contrast between the
‘soundness’ of substantive argumentation, which has the body and force needed to
carry conviction, and the ‘validity’ of formal arguments, whose conclusions are
determined by the starting points from which they are deduced.
When religion falls during the Enlightenment and continues to plummet in its explanatory power during the modern era, man must find a new source for the direction of his life. How do we know our nature? There is no longer a divine mediation between the signifier and the signified. Language has been desacralized. Thought or man makes the world, not god. Foucault writes, “It is no longer the task of knowledge to dig out the ancient Word from the unknown places where it may be hidden; its job now is to fabricate a language, and fabricate it well—so that as an instrument of analysis and combination, it will really be the language of calculation.” Man emerges from the darkness as modern man, the center of the world, imbued with the power of nomination, creation and judgment, based upon a new found source of knowledge, internal to the consciousness of man. This internal knowledge is understood as the rationality of the modern man.

In “Truth and Power”, Foucault reveals the production of truth as an active tool of power, which links notions of the scientific and rational to morality in order to systematize the juridical power of the state. He recognizes the use of scientific rationalist methodology as manipulative of the ways one is able to define self and the sovereign other in order to maintain the system of displaced sovereignty; sovereignty that no longer belongs to the individual. Foucault presents an analysis of truth that relates knowledge creation to power, writing “‘truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it—a ‘regime’ of truth”.

According to the classical literature, with the Enlightenment and the establishment of liberal thought, knowledge, virtue and truth can only be found in the
empirical world, outside of irrational, sacred forms of knowledge. Science arises as the attempt to keep searching for meaning when the religious order of the burgeoning Westphalian system in Europe is faltering. The epistemology of modern man is imagined through empiricism and Cartesian forms of logic. The critics of this explanation argue that the replacement of irrational, sacral and culturally specific explanations of the functioning of the world and the reorganization of society that occurred in the name of modernity, legitimate the rule, legal and policing structures of Western epistemes.

Foucault examines the way that authority is reworked during the Enlightenment. His analysis casts doubt upon the freedom that the contract and its associated legal structures allow. He writes, “Enlightenment is defined by a modification of the preexisting relation linking will, authority, and the use of reason.”25 This modification belies the total emancipation of the individual described in the classical literature that depicts the movement away from the strictures of pre-modernity. By highlighting the limits to which the individual may transgress the authority of the private sphere, Foucault exposes the weakness that characterizes the individual that Kant, Hobbes and Locke describe as characteristics of one who is enlightened and on the path towards becoming modern.

The mature individual is restricted to decrying the already existing will and institutions of authority within limits of legitimized reason, promising perhaps a “modification” but never a rupture of the existing structures of power. Autonomy is available to the individual to a degree that its exercise remains within a homogenous, liberalized notion of rational action. Similarly, non-Western societies are encouraged within the norm of modernization to become the enlightened rational actor, obeying the
dictates of already existing economic institutions and making adjustments to their internal policies in a way that will move away from, and simultaneously highlight, the traditional or non-modern characteristics imbued within that space.

Foucault describes the “universal intellectual, as he functioned in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”, as a “man of justice, the man of law, who counterposes to power, despotism, and the abuses and arrogance of wealth the universality of justice and the equity of an ideal law.” Foucault argues that the juridical notion of universality creates a set of rights that seemingly limit the sovereign, and the intellect who praises universality is seemingly acting on behalf of the proletariat, the universal slave. Horkheimer and Adorno agree with Foucault that this period, noted for the liberation of the self from the institutions that dominated knowledge, was never an actual moment of freedom, but a shift in the relationship between the individual and the existing power relations. Horkheimer and Adorno cast doubt upon the notion that the hierarchical relationship that prevented any possibility of self-improvement due to already decreed societal positions is overthrown by capitalism, Enlightenment and becoming modern.

Horkheimer and Adorno describe the Enlightenment as a confluence of liberalism and the scientific revolution, which appears to free mankind from the shackles of fear that had, until this point, tied the human being to capricious nature via irrational forms of mysticism. With the tools of science, unity is revealed, disparity removed, and man attains power through the disassociation of himself from the natural environment surrounding him. However, Horkheimer and Adorno write, “It is the identity of the spirit and its correlate the unity of nature, to which the multiplicity of qualities falls victim.
Disqualified nature becomes the chaotic matter of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes mere possession—abstract identity.”  

Logic and rationality, having demonstrated their utility to explain the natural plane, replace sensational or emotive explanations for the social plane. “In lay discussions as well as in scientific, reason has come to be commonly regarded as an intellectual faculty of co-ordination, the efficiency of which can be increased by methodological use and by the removal of any non-intellectual factors, such as conscious or unconscious emotions.” As the modernity narrative is told, science allows the individual to decipher mathematical rules that govern the universe as well as human behavior, evident in economistic explanations of society. “According to the philosophy of the average modern intellectual, there is only one authority, namely, science, conceived as the classification of facts and the calculation of probabilities. The statement that justice and freedom are better in themselves than injustice and oppression is scientifically unverifiable and useless. It has come to sound as meaningless in itself as would the statement that red is more beautiful than blue, or that an egg is better than milk.” Modern man loses the freedom to experience and express his place in the world outside of rational language, and thereby debilitates any claim to a set of imperatives outside of utility maximization. “The pioneers of bourgeois civilization, the spiritual and political representatives of the rising middle class, who were unanimous in declaring that reason plays a leading role in human behavior, perhaps even the predominant role. They defined a wise legislature as one whose laws conform to reason; national and international policies were judged according to whether they followed the lines of reason.”
Horkheimer and Adorno reveal the danger inherent within Enlightenment and characterizations of the modern, where the individual, whether master or slave, becomes subservient to the demands of the universalizing, dominating mechanisms of progress. They argue that the separation of the individual from his sensual, unique self debilitates mankind in a kind of regression.\footnote{“Today machinery disables men even as it nurtures them.”} The classical literature tells us that the modern is made possible through the rational individual who engages in contractual relationships that allow him to protect his wealth and to advance in the world. The reorganization of social life according to the principles of utility and production has been made possible by the domination of the scientific, rational mode of knowledge.

This mode of knowledge has determined reason and its application to production as the apex of social organization and progress, evident in economic and technologic advances, becomes defined as the goal for human life. “Activities are branded as senseless of superfluous, as luxuries, unless they are useful, or as in wartime, contribute to the maintenance and safeguarding of the general conditions under which industry can flourish. Productive work, manual or intellectual, has become respectable, indeed the only accepted way of spending one’s life, and any occupation, the pursuit of any end that eventually yields an income, is called productive.”\footnote{The epistemological hegemony of the progress narrative that is part of modernity forecloses expressions and valuations of being on the ideational plane that fall outside of a Calvinist notion that equates productiveness to worthiness. This conviction has profound material consequences, evident in the relations of power held by states and international institutions that wield the ability to actively rank societies as higher or lower on a spectrum of development, and}
in this ranking determine the need for non-rational, non-productive, non-modern states to be reworked into emancipated, progress-oriented modern social entities.

**Polanyi’s Critique of Property as Emancipation**

Like Foucault, Horkheimer and Adorno, Michel Polanyi argues that the machines of progress and forms of labor that accompany the pronounced liberation that accompanies modernity are in fact a means to legitimate new forms of wealth and power that have developed during the 18th and 19th century in Europe. By basing the conception of the modern polity upon the rational individual and the protection of private property, normative concepts such as equality, freedom and flourishing are intertwined with the exercise of state control and market-based organization of society. Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*, demystifies the ahistorical, positivist characteristics of classical economic theory by tracing the transformation of society that occurred in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution in England. Polanyi argues that the idea of the individual, disembedded from community is critical to the political economic struggle that was occurring during the enclosure of the English Commons and the proceeding Industrial Revolution. He writes, “The Industrial Revolution was merely the beginning of a revolution as extreme and radical as ever inflamed the minds of sectarians, but the new creed was utterly materialistic and believed that all human problems could be resolved given an unlimited amount of material commodities.”34 Polanyi warns “however natural it may appear to us…a [market] system is an institutional structure which, as we all too easily forget, has been present at no time except our own.”35 This system is a distinct part of becoming modern. In the early stages of capitalism in 19th century England, Polanyi writes that
In 1834, industrial capitalism was ready to be started and Poor Law Reform was ushered in. By the time of [the repeal of the Speenhamland Law] huge masses of the laboring population resembled more the specters that might haunt a nightmare than human beings. But if the workers were physically dehumanized, the owning classes were morally degraded. The traditional unity of a Christian society was giving way to a denial of responsibility in the part of the well-to-do for the condition of their fellows. To the bewilderment of thinking minds, unheard-of wealth turned out to be inseparable from unheard-of poverty. Scholars proclaimed in unison that a science had been discovered which put the laws governing man’s world beyond any doubt. It was at the behest of these laws that compassion was removed from the hearts, and a stoic determination to renounce human solidarity in the name of the greatest happiness of the greatest number gained the dignity of a secular religion. 

With the reorganization of society along capitalist lines of production, Polanyi asserts that the Judeo-Christian sense of morality that entails an obligation to care for one’s neighbor is replaced during the 19th century by social Darwinism and by natural law, which elevates self-interest to a valid and righteous ethos. Without denying the economic as a standard aspect of human life, Polanyi points to the unique moment in history of human societies when the principle of gain became justified as a dominant mode of human life. He argues,

Nineteenth-century civilization alone was economic in a different and distinctive sense, for it chose to base itself on a motive only rarely acknowledged as valid in the history of human societies, and certainly never before raised to the level of justification and behavior in everyday life, namely, gain. The self-regulating market was uniquely derived from this principle. The mechanism that the motive of gain set in motion was comparable in effectiveness only to the most violent outbursts of religious fervor in history…

The shift towards capitalist modes of production signified an economistic reorganization of social life, resulting in a transformation of society and reinforcing the characteristics of the modern individual. The transformation of society through the spread of the motive for gain accompanies the commodification of social life and the
environment. In an effort to contain and control nature, man engages in a process of production and consumption subjugated by economic organization based on capitalist principles. The growth of capitalism is related to the emergence of the rational actor of the Enlightenment and the social contract, shifting the social organization of European life in a way that is part of becoming the universal modern. Here, the intermingling of modernity as concept and phenomenon is evident.

Polanyi offers a critique of the ideational celebration of the agency and potential of the modern individual as lauded in the classical literature, instead bemoaning the material transformation of society through the spread of the gain motive accompanying the commodification of social life and the environment. Though criticizing the violence of becoming modern, Polanyi does not take issue with the narrative of modernity as offered by the classical authors, in fact reinforcing in his critique the supposed evolution from contract to capitalism, commodification and transformation of social life along a historical continuum.

Norbert Elias’ Notion of Imbuing Progress: Civilizing into the Modern

Polanyi’s reading of the modernization process by tracing the thread of modernity back to the 19th century paints a picture of an inevitable set of circumstances that lead to present liberal notions of progress and being modern. Another way of questioning modernity comes by way of Elias, who explores the manner in which modernity as a sign of progress and societal good acts upon those groups of people who since the colonial era have been the object of reshaping into the image of the West. Elias describes the way in which modernity acts as a “civilizing process”, arguing:
It has been shown in detail above how constraints through others from a variety of angles are converted into self-restraints, how the more animalistic human activities are progressively thrust behind the scenes of men’s communal social life and invested with feelings of shame, how the regulation of the whole instinctual and affective life by steady self-control becomes more and more stable, more even and more all-embracing. All this certainly does not spring from a rational idea conceived centuries ago by individual people and then implanted in one generation after another as the purpose of action and the desired state, until it was fully realized in the ‘centuries of progress’. And yet, though not planned and intended, this transformation is not merely a sequence of unstructured and chaotic changes.38

We have seen the ways that the notion of modernity has been constructed through the writings of 19th century authors such as Maine, Mill, Marx, Hegel and others. Within this perspective, how to move the non-West into a modernized position is the follow-up question. For most of the authors listed above, the general solution to modernizing the non-modern is to dismantle kinship networks and encourage individuality in their stead, to assert a rational epistemology in the place of other knowledges, and to encourage capitalist forms of production and associated forms of protection of property as the primary institutions that organize social behavior. Elias asserts that juridical systems, like the liberal contract, are declared as universal. In fact, he argues, the liberal juridical system, like other institutions of modernity, is but a historical and cultural construction. Elias argues:

Legal forms correspond at all times to the structure of society. The crystallization of general legal norms set down in writing, an integral part of property relations in industrial society, presupposes a very high degree of social integration and the formation of central institutions able to give one and the same law universal validity throughout the area they control and strong enough to enforce respect for written agreements. The power which backs up legal titles and property claims in modern times is no longer directly visible. In proportion to the individual it is so great, its existence and the threat emanating from it are so self-evident, that it is very seldom put to the test. This is why there is such a strong tendency to regards this law as something self-explanatory. As if it had come down from heaven, and
absolute ‘right’ that would exist even without the support of this power structure, or if the power structure were different.39

Inherent to the problematic of modernizing the other, or of encouraging Elias’s “civilizing process”, is the idea of progress, and the accompanying assumption of normativity embedded within the movement towards modernity. Authors of the 19th century, who seek to define the modern, act as producers of the characterizations of modernity and reinforce the idea that there is a tangible set of identifications encapsulated in the modern. These characteristics include the binary between rationality and emotion, the rise of and agency of individuality, the establishment of the subject/object distinction, and awareness of historicity. These elements distinguish the modern from the pre-modern, infusing this binary with judgment and normativity. These characteristics are used to separate from the non-modern which serves as the background against which the modern emerges in relief, and provide legitimacy to remaking societies outside of the Western social system into the image of modernity. Elias writes,

“What is happening under our eyes, what we generally call the ‘spread of civilization’ in narrower sense, that is, the spread of our institutions and standards of conduct beyond the West, constitutes, as we have said, the last wave so far within a movement that first took place for several centuries within the West, and whose trend and characteristics patterns, including science, technology, and other manifestations of a specific type of self-restraint, established themselves here long before the concept of ‘civilization’ existed... ‘Civilized’ forms of conduct spread to these other areas because and to the extent that in them, through their incorporation into the network whose centre the West still constitutes, the structure of their societies and of human relationships in general, is likewise changing. Technology, education—all these are facets of the same overall development. In the areas into which the West has expanded, the social functions with which the individual must comply are increasingly changing in such a way as to induce the same constant foresight and affect-control as in the West itself. Here, too, the transformation of the whole of social existence is the basic condition of the civilization of conduct. For this reason we find in the relation of the West to other parts of the world the beginning of the reduction in contrasts which is peculiar to every major wave of the civilizing movement.”40
Fanon and Val Plumwood: The Violence of Mirroring Modernity

By refashioning the non-modern into the image of the Western, modern subject, the modern can actually be made, a “civilizing process”. The master-slave dialectic describes this process of remaking, in which progress of the individual and society is propelled by labor and agency, reinforcing the utility of the episteme of rationality. Frantz Fanon argues that the project of modernizing is characterized by reshaping the slave-object in the image of the master-subject, where the struggle for identity and recognition within a framework of liberalism distracts us from the system of power that maintains the inequality upon which such projects are based. In “Black Skin White Masks”, Frantz Fanon adds to the Hegelian problem of recognition the notion of “misrecognition”, a symptom of racist oppression that projects onto the recognized other a distorted and vilified persona.

For the black colonized subject, a double-movement must occur for the Hegelian transition from slave to master to take place. Fanon argues that black man receives two images: from the white man he is regarded as an object that is bad, evil, unworthy of recognition, and from himself. he despises his own image which he has internalized as the unworthy other, a moment of transitivity. First he must negate his non-modern identity, and then take measures to become recognizable by those who lay claim to the modern. As Fanon describes it, “the Negro selects himself as an object capable of carrying the burden of original sin. The white man chooses the black man for this function, and the black man who is also white chooses the black man. The black
Antillean is the slave of this cultural imposition. After having been the slave of the white man, he enslaves himself.”

Val Plumwood adds another critique of the classical story of dialectical emancipation, taking particular issue with the dualism created in the master-slave relationship. The binary between the master and slave, and the assumption that through labor the slave can emancipate himself are premised upon the way that negative liberty is conceived as part of the modernizing project. She writes, “Dualisms are not just free-floating systems of ideas; they are closely associated with domination and accumulation, and are their major cultural expressions and justifications.” These dualisms are culturally and historically defined and, as constructions, and can be reformulated in the distinction between the pre-modern and the modern, in a making of “freedoms from” a vilified position of alterity.

Plumwood argues that the relationship of master-slave organizes four major features of dominator-dominated conceptual dualisms, including backgrounding, radical exclusion, incorporation and homogenization. Each of these features allows for a naturalization of the dichotomy, a disdain versus valuation within the relationship, and a reduction and stereotyping of reality in order to allow the concepts to be boxed into the duality. Plumwood explains that, “The features of dualism…provide the cultural grounding for class-centered hegemony…for male-centered, Eurocentredness and ethnocentredness, and for human-centredness.”

The racist overtones that are painted into the premises of being modern belie the promises of liberation found within the process of becoming or being made modern. Foucault, Horkheimer and Adorno, Polanyi, Elias, Fanon, and Plumwood all critique the
authors of the Enlightenment and the 19th century, claiming that the classical literature has produced a narrative of progress that does not emancipate but instead revises the way that power and authority are legitimized. Authors who fall under the post-colonial rubric further interrogate the implications of intertwined notions of evolution and race. In addition, by calling attention to the particular logic of modernity, which these authors employ in their own arguments, post-colonial theorists unsettle the assumptions about rationality and the linear movement towards an improved future embedded within the conception of becoming modern.

Section III. Systematic Boundaries of Modernity

In examining the way in which the modern has been characterized by authors in the Enlightenment and the 19th century, it is evident that the discipline of classical political theory reinforces a “regime of truth” against which societies both in and outside the West have been organized and compared. Understood as a sign, modernity describes the social, political and economic qualities that are particular to the attitude and historical emergence of the social system that developed during the 19th century in Europe. Looking to post-structuralist as well as post-colonial voices enables an expansion of the way in which modernity can be viewed, and pushes the critique beyond questioning the intellectual and moral superiority of the dominant Western episteme.

If we recognize the modern knowledge system as an explanatory logic bounded in one particular time, space and culture, we then might argue that the notion that social existence should be organized around rational, utilitarian enhancement of productive abilities is only one form a social system can take.
Alberto Melucci and Bounded Ontologies

Alberto Melucci offers the notion of a social system as a way to place parameters around the ontology of a particular social group, implying the variety possible in social organization across time and space. He writes,

If we refer to a social system as a set of elements (individuals or groups) connected by interdependent relationships (implying, that is to say, that any variation in one element has effects on all the others), we can at any given moment identify a recognizable pattern describing the character and quantity of elements and relationships; we may refer to this pattern as the structure of a system. A system is defined by its internal boundaries (maintenance of its structure, and by the fact that it is delimited in relation to its environment. The existence of a system moreover implies that the whole of its elements and their mutual relationships is qualitatively different than the simple sum total of these same elements.  

The definition of progress offered by the classical literature is premised upon particular expressions of the desire for recognition and economistic satisfaction built into the system of modernity, unique to the intellectual traditions of Western Europe. That satisfaction may be conjured as the relief of material needs through built economic structures; for example, recognition of human rights through the establishment juridical mechanisms based on liberal notions of justice that particularize the protection of property is one way of imagining satisfaction. However, Melucci argues against this sense of satisfaction and the losses inherent within it. He writes, “The religious disenchantment of the contemporary world (Beckford 1989) has not only brought the death of the gods. Instrumental rationality has restored the world to mankind’s scope of operation, but it also denies humanity all chances to transcend reality; it devalues everything that resists subsumption under the instrumental action. Society becomes a system of apparatuses identical with its own actions and intolerant of any diversity.”
Human beings under the project of modernization do not have the freedom to create the definition of social, political and economic life as they choose to understand it, and there is evidence of struggle. Melucci writes that this struggle takes shape as a conflict of nomination, conflict over the meaning of words and things in a society in which the name to an increasing degree supplants reality. It is precisely because of this that language, through ethnic and linguistic identity, becomes so important in today’s information society, the manner in which we nominate things at once decides their very existence…Thus, the right to autonomy in the construction of the world is affirmed in the diversity of language.46

The epistemological violence of modernity (re)produces material violences that began during the colonial era and remain today, evident in the reframing of lives according to Western definitions of productivity and the shift harnessing of human potential into capitalist market transactions.

**Bataille’s Challenge to the Episteme of Progress**

Like Melucci, Georges Bataille objects to the idea that our desires in life can be satisfied in the subjugation of existence to utility, the premise upon which the classical theorists imagine the movement of history to be based. The present moment, consumption, reveling within the unity of the unproductive, amorphous irrationality of life--these are all subordinated to production, to the creation of a surplus, to a fixation on the future and the recreation of the unquenchable desire for material desire. Bataille defines our way of being as not just existing in the present, but as an expectation of being, “as if we never received being authentically, but only the anticipation of being, which will be and is not, as if we were not the presence that we are, but the future that we will be and are not…”47 Work, the classical modernization story tells us, is the vehicle
that sets our anticipation in motion, the connecting necessity that removes us from the present towards the future in a denial of our inevitable end. According to Bataille, our economic systems, whether capitalist or communist, manifest our need to focus on the future, to deny the present, to deny the “inevitable disappointment of the expectation.”

According to the classical literature, with labor, man has the notion that he can control his world, and reshape his environment by utilizing his rational toolbox to create a future better than the present.

However, Bataille sets forth to demonstrate that the scientific, rational, intellectual world is flawed because it is unable to explain two of the most critical aspects of the human experience: procreation and death. As the classical narrative of modernity goes, knowledge, virtue and truth can only be found outside of emotive or non-rational experience in the empirical world. In an effort to contain and control nature, man engages in a process of production and consumption subjugated to utility. With the tools of rationality, we can explore and control parts of our world, using economic equations to predict and organize the chaos of nature and, in doing so, we set up institutions that reify our being. However, Bataille argues that scientific rationalism is rooted in our fear of the unquantifiable, evident in the inability of Western logic to determine scientific explanation for what happens to consciousness in the moments of death and passion.

The erotic is a mode of anticipation of the annihilation and ecstasy found in both the moments of both procreation and death, heightening the appeal and the modern epistemological perversion of our passionate reality. Bataille writes, “The common misappreciation of death calls for us to despise the link associating death with eroticism, regarded as a promise of life. The law given in nature is so simple as to defy ignorance.
According to this law, life is effusion; it is contrary to equilibrium, to stability. It is the tumultuous movement that bursts forth and consumes itself. Its perpetual explosion is possible on one condition: that the spent organisms give way to new ones, which enter the dance with new forces.”  

In this cycle, we can recognize a deep unity, in which subject and object disappear, and “the richness and the soothing splendor of death and the universe are to be regained…” The linkage between sexuality and death causes us to fear and condemn sexuality, but we are drawn to its life-giving power and should celebrate it. Because our dominant knowledge mechanism—the scientific method—is unable to explain death and procreation, death becomes the ultimate horror, and sexual effusions become superfluous and disgusting. Because we cannot control the inevitability of death, we deny it. We subordinate the “accursed share”, death and the erotic, because it threatens our being.

Bataille, like Melucci, finds problematic the priority that modern society gives to science and economic production at the sacrifice of other ways of knowing and defining valuable human activity. Science has separated man from nature, which is unruly and uncontrollable, and the acts that take place in nature are deemed wrong or sinful because of their passionate, irrational qualities, those elements of the human experience that Bataille names “the accursed share.”

“Man appears to be the only animal to be ashamed of that nature whence he comes, and from which he does not cease to have departed. This is a sore point for us. We have fashioned this humanized world in our image by obliterating the very traces of nature.”

Driven by fear of the loss of self, the domination of rationality has resulted in a “world devoid of sensuality…Thought is asexual: one will see this limitation—
antithetical to sovereignty, to every sovereign attitude—makes of the intellectual world the flat and subordinate world that we know, this world of useful and isolated things, in which laborious activity is the rule, in which it is implied that each one of us should keep his place in a mechanical order.” 54 Bataille refutes this order, raising his voice with Nietzsche in a cry for Dionysian justice instead of repeating the enslaving cycle set forth by Hegel where the desire for recognition of self subjugates the individual to a world of utility and anticipation of fulfillment.

Bataille poses radically different conception of knowledge and emancipation from that described in the classical Western episteme of progress and being modern. Bataille refutes the economistic, gain-driven individual that is part of the progress narrative embedded within the establishment of the modern. He argues against the potential for liberation that the script of modernity has assigned to labor and productivity in the master-slave dialect. In his narrative, the making of the modern removes the sovereignty of the slave/non-modern to define himself and the world around him.

Section IV: The Failure of Modernity as Sign

Authors such as Bataille, Lata Mani, Sanjay Seth and Dipesh Chakrabarty assert that our acceptance of the modern epistemology and ontology may not be the preferable choice of social knowledge and organization, considering the repressive subordination required by the strictures of becoming a modern. Lata Mani helps our understanding of the material transformations that are undertaken in the discourse of modernity. Mani shows the mechanisms of how notions of “tradition” are born as a result of colonialism’s concretization of particular practices of the colonized in juridical structures. Mani
describes how the British, in their attempt to establish policy regarding sati, or self-immolation by Hindi widows, concretize certain beliefs and practices in their law by looking towards Hindi texts for reference. Mani argues that the British construe Hinduism as a monolithic, textually- rather than orally-conferred religion from which the British establish and define “traditional” practices. She writes,

The discourse on sati…was a modern discourse on tradition. It exemplifies late eighteenth century colonial discourse that elaborated notions of modernity against their own conceptions of tradition. I suggest, in other words, that what we have here is not a discourse in which pre-existing traditions are challenged by an emergent modern consciousness, but one in which both ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ as we know them are contemporaneously produced.55

The signification of the mark of the modern has acted as a transformative force that performs a type of violence that multiple critiques have not been able to end. For example, the process of international development continues in its attempt to transform what it names as chaotic, violent, irrational spaces into modernized, liberal states. This transformation is justified by calling upon the lack of characterizations offered in the classical narrative of the modern. The violence of modernity as a signifier is evident in the process of “civilizing”, a process that Norbert Elias has claimed drives the habitualization of social behavior through internalized self-policing, similar to Foucault’s argument about knowledge creation and governmentality.

Instead of focusing on the question of whether there is this thing called the modern or whether the modern is better than the pre-modern, or dwelling on the critique that modernity was built on the back of the colonial subject, I argue that the modern is a floating sign or a code with material effects, both concept and phenomenon. As a sign, modernity is a nomination devise which acts in multiple ways to categorize societies
according to a determined set of characteristics, and discourages the valuation of the
social, political and economic forms of organization found outside of Westernize, modern
societies.

Reason, as the dominant characteristic of modernity, has created a “totalitarian
dream” that endeavors to recreate global society into the image of the West. The sign of
the modern reinforces an epistemology of progress that limits the language to nominate
societal formations as valid outside of its own systemic conceptions. If we take the
modern as a sign: rationality, science, subjectivity, there are reciprocal signs of the non-
modern: tradition, absence of history, the colony as the child, savage or barbarian. Laclau
writes,

In classical discourses, the emancipated identities had to pre-exist the act of
emancipation as a result of their radical otherness vis-à-vis the forces opposing
them. It is true that this is unavoidable in any antagonistic struggle; but if, at the
same time, dichotomization is not truly radical...then the identity of the
oppressive forces has to be in some way inscribed in the identity searching for
emancipation. This contradictory situation is expressed in the undecidability
between internality and externality of the oppressor in relation to the oppressed: to
be oppressed is part of my identity as a subject struggling for emancipation;
without the presence of the oppressor my identity would be different. The
constitution of the latter requires and at the same time rejects the presence of the
other.56

The binary of pre/non-modern is sets up an false distinction between two sets of
characteristics that are only possible by definition against one another. The rational
individual is key to the definition of the modern, a social entity distinct from premodern
forms of social organization based on kinship and a lived relationship to the gods. In
addition to rationality, the rise of the individual, the focus on production, and the rise of
economism emerge as the dominant characteristics ascribed to the modern. To speak of
the modern is to presume the colonial pre-modern; one is not possible without the other.
Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that modernity is based on exclusion, and asks in what ways colonialism shapes the modern.

**Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sanjay Seth: Challenges to Temporality and Tradition**

Like Mani, Chakrabarty argues that the premodern is situated in contrast to the modern, a creation of the Western gaze which continues to view social systems outside of the West as anachronistic. The very idea of asking what is distinctive about the modern is only possible in the modern historical moment. History asserts a certain conception of time, which is a non-universal notion of the past that emerges at a particular time in the West. The attitude of modernity imbues a sense of a universal movement towards an endpoint of civilizational development, a sense of history that is uniquely found in the 19th century. Chakrabarty writes that

One might way that [historicism] was one important form that the ideology of progress or “development” took from the nineteenth century on. Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it…Historicism thus posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West.57

Seth argues that history is one way of think of the past; if we accept heterotemporality, time is not necessarily linear or secular. This notion unsettles the progress narrative of modernity.

To live in history, and to wish to write it, is not a universal anthropological postulate (and it most emphatically is not rooted in an existential experience of time), but is rather a certain way to conceive of and be in the world, at once a tradition of reasoning, a way of being, and a certain practice of subjectivity. The emergence of this orientation to the past and to the self is specific to certain people (societies, classes) and not others. It is connected to some phenomenon—the emergence of the modern nation-state, ‘progress’, scientific rationality—and not others, which it may indeed define itself against (magic, gods). 58
Chakrabarty and Seth go beyond the subaltern, saying, for example, not that we have to recognize the place of the gods for the non-modern peasant’s understanding of his own existence and social order, or simply to take seriously the peasants’ beliefs about his gods, but that the gods actually have a place in the narrative as agents. Accepting the gods as actors within narratives allows for different epistemes, and goes outside of the code of history. Chakrabarty states eloquently,

This narrative both gives us a critique of capital imperialism and affords elusive but necessarily energizing glimpses of the Enlightenment promise of an abstract, universal but never-to-be-realized humanity. Without such elusive glimpses, as I have said before, there is not political modernity. On the other side is thought about diverse ways of being, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to ‘world the earth’ in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging.59

This literature radically disrupts the structure of modernity through a discussion of postcolonial theory, which interrogates an understanding of history. The perspectives offered by Seth and Chakrabarty make the point that perhaps characterizations of the modern may mean nothing at all outside of social system in which the Western episteme has been habitualized. There is a history to the epistemology of modernity, yet even the notion of history is dependent upon the conception of time and change particular to the West. Modernity as a sign produces and is produced by dichotomous understandings, thus the challenge is to discuss/theorize social relations without continually being encapsulated by the discourse of modernity and reproducing forms of epistemic violence. Melucci writes that

“The naïve social evolutionism still lying at the basis of many [conceptions of change] is the last legacy of the philosophies of the nineteenth century…The Judeo-Christian tradition preserved the cyclical image of time but also introduced the notion of a linear progression, of a path of salvation whose final meaning was
redeemed by its fulfillment at the end of human history. In every case, change is referred to forces and powers which operate beyond the reach of social life and social relationships. The modern ideas of progress and revolution are but desacralized versions of the Christian legacy, and they continue to rely on a nonsocial notion of change...The great social thinkers of the nineteenth century pushed the modern conception of change to its extreme consequences and started revealing the social nature of social relationships; yet they still shared the positivist idea of the basically presocial determinism on which social phenomena depend (the invisible hand of Adam Smith and the homo economicus of classical political economists, the evolutionist faith of Spencer and Comte, the necessary development of productive forces in Marx’s terms...)

Section V: Conclusion

Authors of the 19th century produce the sign of the modern through creation of a pre/non-modern versus modern binary. This binary creates a rift between rationality and emotion, the rise of individuality versus community, an awareness of historicity and linear temporality. In creating this binary, the modern is described as unique and separate from the pre-modern, creating a dualism infused with judgment, normativity, and racism. The examination of modernity offered in this paper reveals that the project of distinguishing the modern is characterized by a reshaping of the slave-object in the image of the master-subject, where the struggle for identity and recognition within a framework of modernization distracts us from the maintenance of ontological and epistemological violence that continues in the name of making the modern. As the Western gaze cannot see a mirrored self in the other, this illegible party is homogenized in the name of modernization.

Modernity is discussed as a linear project of progress, its characterizations often assumed and not questioned. In the range of explanations for the modern offered in this paper, the making of the modern is both explained and interrogated. The shift towards rationality during the Enlightenment delegitimizes other ways of knowing, and set the
stage for the agential, economistic individual to emerge. The normalization of the social contract encourages economism and capitalism as major factors emblematic of the modern moment. Law is part of this normalization—a textual rendering of social order. The state solidifies the social contract because humans are innately aggressive, according to authors of the Enlightenment, and the need for the state/social contract to ensure freedom becomes associated with the agential individual that is modern.

The project of modernity creates an idea of tradition and the nonmodern/premodern to assert itself. In appropriating the nomination of self and other, evident in the work of the classical theorists, this production of the other enabled and ensured the success of the western self. As Foucault and others have argued, modernity is connected to some idea of truth and power. Part of the project of modernity is to solidify a position of power through the normalization of otherness, which places the western self at the top of a hierarchical ordering of the world. Science supports this project, law supports this project, and social contracts and interstate system support it. From this examination, the naturalization of modernity as a sign that contains particular characterizations of human evolution can be unsettled. The sign of being modern is used to validate, denigrate and transform multiple modes of social, political and economic systems into those nominated as natural, progressive and necessary to the flourishing of humankind, producing epistemic as well as material violences. By recognizing modernity as signifier of a bounded social system that has its own epistemology and associated characteristics, we can question the way in which truth and knowledge have been constructed around the norm of being modern.
The assertions of Seth and Chakrabarty describe the struggles that occur in order to protect and maintain ontological existences that do not obey the dictates of the progress narrative in modernization. The temporality of the epistemology of modernity must be acknowledged and must not be taken as a given development in human existence. These authors push the limits of a discipline that has typically been called upon to explain the modern, claiming that the classical literature has abetted the hegemonic effects of modernization on both the ideational and material planes.

To view modernization as a project of hegemony, or as a totalitarian vision of transformation, flies in the face of those who overlay modernization with ideas about democracy, justice and equality. Laclau argues that the classical texts on modernity which establish an a priori set of characteristics of “modern” and therefore “developed” societies deny the “incompletion and provisionality [that] belong to the essence of democracy.” Laclau asserts that the failure of the rational, racialized, gendered epistemes of modernity performs an emancipation for those who would otherwise define themselves and their ways of being and knowing as outside or beyond the knowledge system of the West. He argues

Reason is necessary, but it is also impossible. The presence of its absence is shown in the various attempts to ‘rationalize’ the world that finite social agents carry out. Precariousness and ultimate failure (if we persist in measuring success by an old rationalistic standard) are certainly the destiny of these attempts, but through this failure we gain something perhaps more precious than the certainty that we are losing: a freedom vis-à-vis the different forms of identification, which are impotent to imprison us within the network of an unappealable logic…If limited and finite beings try to know, to make the world transparent to themselves, it is impossible that this limitation and finitude is not transmitted to the products of their intellectual activity. In this sense, the abandonment of the aspiration to ‘absolute’ knowledge has exhilarating effects: on the one hand, human beings can recognize themselves as the true creators and no longer as the passive recipients of a predetermined structure; on the other hand, as all social agents have to recognize their concrete finitude, nobody can aspire to be the true
consciousness of the world. This opens the way to an endless interaction between various perspectives and makes ever more distant the possibility of any totalitarian dream.\textsuperscript{62}

Recent political theory has transformed the questions of modernity by critiquing the naturalization of rationality and temporality. These authors help us think through the question of modernity, challenging the discipline to include these and other voices that argue against the narrative which so readily ascribes prowess to Western forms of logic and social organization.

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\item Immanuel Kant, p. 56.
\item G. W. Hegel, Philosophy of History (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 103-104.
\item G. W. Hegel, p. 99.
\item John Stuart Mill, p. 73.
\end{enumerate}
“Modern” political theory refers here to theorists of the late 19th to the mid-20th century, taught by the discipline of political science as distinct from the classical and ancient bodies of political thought.


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26 Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment,” p. 128.


31 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, p. 34.

32 Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 37.

33 Horkheimer, p. 37.


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42 Val Plumwood, Feminism and Mastery of Nature, p. 42.

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44 Melucci, p. 50.

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49 Georges Bataille, p. 81.

50 Bataille, p. 85.
51 Bataille, p. 235.
52 Georges Bataille, pp. 22-23.
53 Georges Bataille, p. 61.
58 Sanjay Seth, p. 95.
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60 Alberto Melucci, p. 49.
61 Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 16.
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