MODERNITY AND HISTORY

On the Edge of Modernity: The Sense of Exodus

Does modernity still have a future? The news from the modern world suggests a negative answer. It is true, the project of modernity, in the fourth century after its inception, has still not been brought to its completion. Modern man has not yet succeeded in establishing himself as maître et possesseur de la nature.1 Nevertheless, he has elevated himself above his earthly existence by mastering the laws of space travel; the man in the moon, formerly a mythological figure, has now an American name. Modern man has not yet reached Utopia where the necessity of labor and the ease of leisure would be reconciled; in many regards, he is still bound to toil for his subsistence. But he has invented artificial intelligence and thus has found a humanoid substitute for an endless number of cumbersome tasks; work is transformed into computer games. Modern man has not yet become the Lord of his life, he continues to miss a complete control over infirmities, afflictions, and, finally, death. But he has fathomed the biochemical basis of life and acquired the skills to manipulate the forms of being; the breath of life is recorded as genetic code.

The world of modernity, founded about 350 years ago, is a prodigious display of "progress" and since it is unfinished, since

more "progress" towards "modernity" could be made, one might assume that a continued pursuit of the modern project is generally expected. Yet, in the contemporary world more and more people seem to detect on the route to modernity a sign: CLOSED. They step aside, look about, weigh directions, turn towards pathways, passages, roads which lead from the course of modernity to the open field of para-modern modes of life. Their aspirations and actions supersede the achievements of modernity. In the realm of politics, for instance, the evolution of modernity engendered the existence of powerful, monolithic states. In consequence, the patchwork of governments which in pre-modern times had tempered the manifestations of political power by an anarchic texture was successively subjected to "reforms" in order to be regularized, schematized, mended according to the needs of modern statehood. Today, the centralized power of the State-or the "Federal" Government-has still a supreme influence over the public affairs of the people, but the popular aspirations are concentrated upon a reviviscence of *regional* and local entities of politics and public life. Central governments are compelled—by a shift in the public opinion, by a stronger assertion of regional and local interests, by the mandate of the electorate-to respond to these para-modern aspirations and to redistribute some of the power from the "center" towards the 'periphery."²

Currents of a para-modern mentality are perceptible in other areas as well. The general mobility and the standardized life style which a "modern" society offers seem to have lost a great deal of their attraction; the social world is interpreted instead in a process of differentiation that allows one to locate and define the place of one's own particular existence in this world. Contrary to the modern notion of equality—a general equality in all areas of life-dissimilarities, specific qualities, distinctions with respect to spatial, professional, religious or ethnic identifications are reaffirmed, restituted or even reproduced.3 In view of the destructive impact of modern technology upon man's natural habitat, large groups of people articulate and practice a new attitude towards nature, refusing to regard the earth simply as a reservoir of cheap resources. A decade ago "ecologists" appeared to be romantics, captivated by Naturschwärmerei. Now, their influence upon national policies—in the fields of nuclear energy,

environmental protection, land use and urban development—is evident.⁴ The functional, machinelike forms of modern architecture, once hailed as the international building style of a "progressive" age, are now being blamed for the pathological character of social life in the large settlements of highrise buildings which were once thought to be "modern" improvements upon the "old" cities.⁵ Architects, urban planners, citizen groups and even governments have discarded the principles of modern architecture and are presently engaged in the common effort of implementing that post-modern policy of building and urban (re-)development whose results become increasingly visible: there are revitalized neighborhoods, restored city centers, old buildings adapted to a new use, landmarks put under protection, new buildings and new urban ensembles constructed on the human scale.⁶

Originally, the concept of modernity carried the promise of man's emancipation from every natural and transcendent power. In assuming a quasi-divine autonomy of his existence and in subjecting the cosmos of life to his will, "modern" man would become the sole master of his fate and the Lord of his own world.7 Now the effects of modern civilization excite, at the level of individuals as well as at the level of societies, an angoisse, forebodings of a catastrophe.⁸ The modern message is read by those people in an apocalyptic mood: modern man, instead of acquiring a divine quality, has suffered a loss of humanity; and instead of creating a "second," immaculate nature, he has endangered the continuity of life on the earth. They realize that the "progress" of modern civilization still continues, but they know that it occurs in a contrarious way-drawing this civilization ever closer to the edge of modernity. And there, on the edge, their vision of modernity changes into the image of an abyss.

A sense of exodus presently pervades the world of modern man. Many people are aware of it, but not all are prepared to respond to the historical challenge; "... everybody knows that things cannot go on in the same way but those who carry responsibility cannot think of solutions other than those of yesterday."⁹ However, there is a striking similarity of reflections among those who articulate this sense of exodus. Sociological studies of modern society diagnose "dilemmas of modernity,"¹⁰

"contradictions of modernity," an "eclipse of modernity,"¹¹ or introduce the metaphor of the "homeless mind" in order to depict man's modern experience.¹² From a comprehensive critique of modern literature and its philosophical foundations Octavio Paz draws the conclusion: "What has become a matter of doubt, in the second half of our century, is not the idea of art but that of modernity ... I don't say that we witness the end of art: we witness the end of the *idea of modern art* ... The notion of history as a unilinear process of progress has proved to be inconsistent. Modernity begins to lose faith in itself."¹³

And in the field of architecture, the verdict of "fiasco" brought in by the critics of modern architecture has lost its strain of provocation,¹⁴ since in this area considerable advance has already been made in the escape from modernity. Once accustomed to a post-modern perspective, architects swiftly moved to rediscover and to practice again the architectural wisdom that was obliterated in the age of modernity. This rediscovery seems to be the most auspicious indication of an emerging culture beyond modernity.¹⁵

THE MODERN EXPERIENCE, PARA-MODERN REFLECTIONS

As the exodus from modernity develops, the study of modern civilization is correspondingly undertaken in a different way. The emphasis is no longer put on a pure critique of modernity but on a search for clues to a para-modern future. The shift of emphasis became possible to the extent that critics of modern civilization began to perceive intellectual, cultural, social, economic manifestations of modernity in a para-modern perspective; since they knew that the art of critique and negation is *the* quintessential modern act, they were able to disrupt the tradition of modernity by reversing the critical, destructive act then, the question of modernity appeared in a para-modern perspective: what is left, or what is missing, or what can still be said *after* the moment of modern negation?

The modern experience has consequently been the subject of a distinguishable complex of para-modern reflections. In logical terms, each of those reflections represents a chain of thought that starts with the study of a certain aspect of the

modern experience, continues with a reconsideration of the relevant objective in the pursuit of modernity and, finally, converges upon a "rediscovery" of those modes and interpretations of human existence against which the project of modernity was originally opposed.

The institutional structure of modern states, for instance, is in many respects characterized by an "overinstitutionalization" which frequently results in an atrophy of power. This is a paradoxical consequence, for the greater degree of institutionalization was meant to make the apparatus of the State more "effective," more "forceful", more "dynamic", that is: more "modern." In search of a solution, scholars and politicians have rediscovered the significance of the *pouvoirs intermédiaires* whose role had been reduced, if not abolished in an earlier stage of "modernization."¹⁶

Loneliness, an anguish of choice, a cult of narcissism, an eccentric behaviour, a high rate of suicides: these are pathoexistential phenomena that typify modern societies. They arose as more and more people in those societies aspired to actually achieve what the project of modernity implied: everyone's evolution to an "original," "individual," "autonomous" being. As a therapy, the restitution of such social bonds and connections as those which had existed in pre-modern societies but had been destroyed by the social impact of modernity is now increasingly suggested.¹⁷

In the context of modern culture, man's perennial question: "Whence do I come, who am I, where do I go?," can no longer be answered. From a modern point of view, it is irrelevant whether I am here or there; I could be everywhere or—nowhere. There is no place in the modern universe of which modern man could say: this is my place, the place of man in a lasting order of beings and things. Modern man is "homeless" indeed. In retrospect, the cause of his displacement has become apparent: he exiled himself as he set out not only to "conquer" nature but also to transform it into an *imago hominis*, a pure manifestation of human might. He became a stranger in a contingent world. Dwelling upon this existential predicament of modern man, the present critics of modernity are reconsidering and concentrating their attention upon patterns of meaning in all the dimensions of reality which man experiences; and they

articulate a new, para-modern sensibility towards the *cosmos* of life, towards the world of correspondences in which all beings and things can be seen as situated and related to each other in a continuing structure. The *cosmos* was once said to have become "disenchanted" in consequence of modernity—present reflections upon the modern experience, however, indicate the revival of cosmological modes of thought.¹⁸

All those "rediscoveries" and reconsiderations-of which a few examples were given here-are made in search of a paramodern civilization. This motive should be clearly understood. The objective of the search is not and cannot be a "return" to, or "renaissance" of, pre-modern conditions of human life. What is sought is a balance, or rather a rebalancing, of the conditions of civilization created by modernity and the pre-modern knowledge, wisdom, modes of life which were "lost"-obliterated, forgotten-in the pursuit of modernity. Thus, the objective of the search is neither a restoration of pre-modern civilization nor the foundation of a totally "new" civilization. While the goal-a para-modern civilization—is "known," it is still difficult to perceive the personal and social forms and modes which would precisely correspond with this "knowledge" and to discern how these forms could be actualized, once they are better perceived. The search for a para-modern civilization has to be understood as an anamnesis—as a probe into the depth of the knowledge which springs from the modern erperience.

The Design of a Universal History, or Modernity Retarded

The original question: "Does modernity still have a future?" is meaningful only in a para-modern perspective. From a modern point of view, modernity *is* the future, all future is modern. Any historical epoch beyond the actual "modern" epoch does not supersede modernity but rather represents the latest, "newest" advance in the pursuit of modernity—another epoch in the "modern history" of continuous ruptures between "old" and "new," "ancient" and "modern." Modern consciousness does not allow an escape from modernity: the possibilities to be modern, more modern, and more modern again ... are infinite.

Since the eighteenth century, the historical significance of modernity has repeatedly been rendered into designs of a universal history.¹⁹ These designs were constructed around five postulates: (1) there is but *one* history, one sequence of historical events; (2) it is the history of *one* world, one universe of beings and things; (3) its subject is *all* mankind formed by all past, present and future members of the human species; (4) it evolves in *one* dimension of time, the time of unilinear progress; (5) its purpose becomes manifest in *one* form of civilization, the civilization of modernity.

The history of modernity was thus defined as a universal history, and by way of this historical universalism it became possible to project the entire course of the history of modern civilization. As Schelling observed, the projected history of modern civilization-to which I refer here as "History I"began, when man "unfettered himself from nature."20 The objective of this cosmic emancipation of man was explicitly defined by those authors who successfully propagated the foundation of the "Modern World" in the seventeenth century. They drew a "mighty Design": "... the deep and judicious Verulam ... proposed ... to reform and inlarge Knowledge by Observation and Experiment ... that our Notions may have a Foundation upon which a solid Philosophy may be built, that may be firm, tite, and close knit and suited to the Phenomena of things: So that Nature being known, it may be master'd, managed, and used in the Services of Humane Life."²¹ The key symbol by which the "mighty Design" became known was introduced by Francis Bacon, the leading figure among the modern founding fathers: in his Novum Organum (1620) he presents a variation upon the Christian concept of the reign of God (regnum Dei) by describing the *projected* modern world emerging from man's conquest and domination of nature as a reign of man (regnum hominis)22-and he suggests, by the parallelism of his symbolic construction, that a perfection of human existence, once to be discerned in the mode of Christian faith and hope only, can now be expected for certain as the final achievement in the projected history of modern civilization.23

Since the *Novum Organum* instituted the key symbol of "History I," the year of its publication, 1620, could accordingly be considered as the beginning of this history—the zero year

of the modern age. This year, 1982, then, is the 362nd year of "History I." The idea to compare the *projected* course of "History I" with the *actual* history of the past 361 years would hardly seem to be inappropriate. The comparison reveals an immense divergence of actual history from "History I;" the former has followed a course quite other than the one projected as the course of the latter. The history of modernity appears to be divided into two parts: History I, the *projected* history of modern civilization, and History II, the *actual* history of modern civilization.

The difference between "History I" and "History II" can be demonstrated by empirical observations. Contrary to the first postulate of designs of modern history (see above), the actual history of the modern age does not constitute a universal history, a unilinear sequence of historical events. It is true, our world has been "modernized" to the degree that hardly any place is left on the earth which has not yet been touched by modern civilization. But this process of modernization has not taken place in the same way in all areas and countries. Some countries are more modernized, others much less; in some countries modernization is going on as a dynamic process, whereas in others it has come to a standstill. The common practice of designating less modernized countries as "underdeveloped" or "developing" countries simply reflects the misguided attempt to put all countries on the one-imaginal-time axis of modernity, in spite of the factual diversity of their particular histories in relation to the modern experience.

Still, one could argue that a few countries do by now display achievements of modern civilization which seem to surpass even the dreams of the modern founding fathers. Is the history of these countries then not identical with "History I," have they not attained the *regnum hominis*? No—the greatest achievements which have been made in the pursuit of modernity are everything but manifestations of a *regnum hominis* and therefore suggest a rather disconcerting conclusion: this is the year 362 of modernity and modern progress shows modern civilization to be in a state of retardation—it evinces a Utopian remoteness of the *regnum hominis* that was promised as an attainable goal a long time ago. No doubt, this is the age of modernity; but it is the age of modernity—retarded.

As a result, modern consciousness has become a consciousness of imprisonment. On one side, it does not allow an escape from modernity, since it constitutes an infinite freedom to reject everything, to revolt against anything—but all rejections, revolts, including revolts against modernity, are "modern" acts. On the other side, being aware that modernity is still retarded, modern consciousness transforms every modern experience of progress into an experience of deprivation—each advance in the pursuit of modernity beyond the current level of modernity re-creates the awareness of the Utopian remoteness where the *regnum hominis* resides, the one step forward does not offset the endless distance which is still not covered, the infinite progress towards modernity appears as an infinite progress into deprivation. Thus, modern consciousness is stalled—reflecting a modern world which will never be modern.

The Story of Man

The pursuit of modernity has of course been a constituent factor in the formation of the contemporary world. It has not led to a world which is totally "modern," however. Modern civilization is the surface contemporary world covering an expansive complex of pre-modern "subcultures," different "sub-histories" of modernization, age-old modes of life, legacies of pre-historic, ancient and medieval civilizations, pre-modern forms of social and political organization.²⁴ The modern conception of history cannot account for the reality of this complex which is not congruous with the postulate of a unilinear evolution of human history. Attempts to place manifestations of this reality on the one axis of advancements and progress which only suits the modern view of history have the effect that these manifestations either "disappear" or become "streamlined" in accordance with "modern" historiography. Reflections upon the history of modernity lead to paradoxical results when carried to their full consequence. At first, the historical significance of modernity is apprehended in the form of a universal history; it is then understood that respective designs of a universal history represent the historical project of infinite progress; in the following, an empirical test of this historical project reveals a split in the history of mo-

dernity: there are "History I" and "History II;" then the projected course of modern history is detected as the circular movement of an endless—that is: futile—pursuit of modernity; as a consequence, the question: What else is the modern world, if it is not (and will never be) really modern? arises and the attempt to answer it finally leads to the paradoxical conclusion of this chain of reflections: an inquiry into the history of modernity requires an inquiry into the historical world of premodern, sub-modern, and para-modern forms of civilization.

Modernity itself is the barrier that blocks the way to its future. This discovery is not a deadlock, it is a breakthrough: beyond the route to modernity a vast historical world has come into view. The history of this world is formed by a plurality of histories, by a manifold of historical axes which describe parallel, consecutive, concurrent, diagonal, transverse courses. Thus, the (re-)discovery of this world (re-)opens the view upon a field of study and reflection whose expanse, fertility and greater reality sharply contrast with the one-dimensional "universality" of a modern perception of history. In this field the historical inquiry is no longer bound to follow the one axis of modern "progress," but can move in all directions-sideways, forwards, backwardsor can "jump" from one historical axis to another, or can proceed "contemporaneously" on a set of correspondent axes. It is no longer undertaken with the purpose to identify the "subject" or "goal" of "history"-"mankind," the "intellect," "progress," "enlightenment," "civilization" ... - and to delineate an appropriate course of "history." For there is no history, but a web of histories—life stories, memories, myths, historical narratives, interpretations of historical events and configurations, comparative accounts of correspondent epochs and correspondent historical experiences.

In the domain of architecture, for instance, presently living architects pursue a sort of educational dialogue with those anonymous builders of vernacular architecture who lived 2000, 1000 or only 100 years ago and produced an "architecture without architects" in many different regions of the earth. A dialogue between such "unequal" partners in terms of "time" (2000 years ...) and "space" (global distances ...) is possible, since they are also—within a structure of correspondence—"contemporaries" and "cohabitants" in search of architectural prin-

ciples which would alleviate "modern" architecture, the present generation of architects "rediscovers" the architectural wisdom which is manifest in vernacular architecture; they learn the "ancient" ways of conserving energy, of adapting building structures to seasonal and diurnal changes of climate and temperatures, of correlating the rhythm of architectural space to the rhythm of human life, of enhancing the community life of people by the art of architecture.²⁵ In the process of this "rediscovery" the geographical and temporal "distances" shrink, while the correspondence of concerns and the common wisdom constitute the structure of a "contemporaneous" and "equispatial" experience.²⁶ Accordingly, an historical interpretation of para-modern architecture finds its parallel in the history of vernacular architecture, or, vice versa: the "history" of vernacular architecture represents a vast field of correspondences where para-modern architecture can "historically" be situated as a parallel to configurations of vernacular architecture at different times and in different places. The historical interpretation can "freely" move across temporal and spatial distances in all directions and yet it will not get lost as it follows the axis of the contemporaneous and equispatial experience which it describes.²⁷

Similar observations could be made with respect to the ecological movement. The notion of "natural" growth and cultivation and the economic principle of "recycling" correspond to age-old practices of life which were only abandoned under the impact of modernization. Again, an inquiry into the historical dimension of "ecology"—following the axis of ecological experience—would reveal an extensive "historical" field of ecological wisdom.

Or—a third and last example—the struggle of dissidents in authoritarian and totalitarian states is another relevant phenomenon. For the history of this struggle runs "parallel" to the history of earlier struggles for freedom such as those, for instance, that took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe under the rule of absolutism. The dissidents of today are "contemporaries" of writers like Gerrard Winstanley, Montesquieu, and Tom Paine; the authors of *samizdat* pursue similar aspirations to those of the intellectual fathers of the American Revolution.

The "free" movement of the historical inquiry within a

manifold of "historical" correspondences is not "free" in the sense of an arbitrary choice of passages. The passages to the discovery of these correspondences cannot be found outside a pattern of "equivalent," "corresponding," "parallel," "configurative" human experiences. The movement of the inquiry loses its direction, becomes meaningless, if it derails from the axes of experience bridging the spatial and temporal distances. Thus, the movement of historical inquiry is also a movement towards a pattern of meaning. It is a pilgrimage along the passages of human experience towards the meaning of human history. The "history" it tells is the story of man.²⁰

THE HIDDEN COSMOS, OR THE PASSAGE OF PROPHETS

In the vast historical world which has come into view beyond the route to modernity, man could be "at home" again. It is a world constituted by a structure of correspondences where the community of men transcends time and space. The Modern Man's burden, which consists in his imagined superiority to all past generations, dissolves as all other men—of the past and of the present—are found to be contemporaries and cohabitants in a common world of equivalent, corresponding, parallel and configurative experiences. This cosmos of life is "hidden" by modern civilization—yet it is "there."

The sense of exodus pervading the modern world, the reviviscent art of cosmology, the anamnetic culture induced by the modern experience suggest a (re-)discovery of the hidden cosmos. Is this the significance of the current search for clues to a para-modern future?

An attempt to answer the question would continue the tradition of modern projections. Yet the passages of human experiences through which an exodus from modernity must go cannot be found by "plans," "designs" or "projects." The answer will be the event: an exodus from modernity through the passage of prophets.

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society has coexisted throughout the entire modern era with older political forms such as tribal, empire, free city, and feudal societies, church or lay prin-cipalities, and so on. Cf. also Berger et al., op. cit., p. 9: "A 'modern society' as such does not exist; there are only more or less advanced societies in a continuing process of modernization."

²⁵ Barbey, G., Gelber, C., Rapports entre l'environnement construit et le comportement humain, Lausanne, 1973; Olivier, P., ed., Shelter, Sign and Symbol,

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²⁶ Levi-Strauss, C., L'Homme nu, Paris, 19/1, p. 596 et seq.; raz, op. cu.: "The poets of the modern age sought the principle of change; we, poets of the age which is beginning, will seek this constant principle which is at the root of change. We ask ourselves if there is not a common factor between *The Odyssey* and *A la recherche du temps perdu.*" ²⁷ Voegelin, E., *The Ecumenic Age*, Introduction, Baton Rouge, 1975, pp. 1-58. Order and History, Vol. IV; Sandoz, E., *The Voegelinian Revolution*, Baton Rouge, 1981, pp. 82-83.