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2005

## The Coming of Modern (World) Society

Sociology is often said to have emerged as an attempt to make sense of the massive transformations that gave rise to modernity. Yet, we still lack a proper understanding, not to mention a clear and uncontested definition, of the central features characterizing modern society. Thus, while some say modernity has already given way to a wholly new, "postmodern" era, others suggest it has at least reached a mature stage of development, permitting us to speak of "high" or "late" modernity. And still others argue that modernity is still in its infancy.

The author of the present paper subscribes to the latter view. Starting from the observation that most of the institutions that are now seen as emblematic of modernity until recently existed only in a small part of the world, "the West", and adopting a world perspective as well as advocating a time horizon for understanding radical social change that spans centuries rather than decades, the paper aims to overcome two flaws inflicting much contemporary social theory: (1) its prevailing Euro- or West-centrism, and (2) its incessant drive to christen new epochs, eras, types of society (e.g., late modernity, reflexive modernity, knowledge society, the information age, etc.). Evidence will be presented that suggests modern life has genuinely begun to touch a majority of the world's population only during the past 50 years or so. At the same time, it does seem that we are now seriously approaching that stage. The millennium thus marks a genuine watershed in world history. Regrettably though, this has gone largely unnoticed in sociology, particularly among scholars specializing in the theory of modernity who, rather than recognizing the tremendous convergence in the development of world social structures and politico-economic institutions, have lately been preoccupied with emphasizing cultural continuities and differences in what are misleadingly called "multiple modernities".

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