

# **The French Cult of the Modern: Power, Identity, and the Idiom of Newness in Nineteenth-Century France**

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## **Abstract**

Reflections on French modernity and modernity in general have customarily been associated with the notion of bourgeois social primacy, outlining a scheme in which industrialization, capitalism, and forms of middle-class sociability and culture have typically served as criteria for mapping the contours of Western modernity. This article seeks to reassess this conventional perspective by examining how the idiom of modernity played a central role in reformulating elite social identity in the midst of the rising democratic political culture taking shape in France during the middle of the nineteenth century. As elites came to terms with mass democracy and colonialism, concepts of modernity and “modern society” became hallmarks of a new public discourse with both inclusive and exclusionary implications, enshrining modernity as a key organizing principle in both the articulation of new social hierarchies and power relationships. This style of representing encouraged a shift toward an identity regime grounded in conceptions of time and temporality which not only broke with established tenets of “bourgeois” liberalism but equally sketched the outline of a new social order in which modernity became the legitimacy for power and domination in a country ostensibly committed to the principles of social equality and pluralism.

## **Keywords**

French modernity, French colonialism, post-Revolutionary European culture, bourgeois social identity, modernization

Residing in the French capital briefly during the early nineteenth century, the German writer Friedrich von Schlegel found Paris obsessed with what he described as “the fantastic caprice of ever-varying fashion.” More than simply a critique on the lifestyles and tastes of Parisian society under Napoleon I, Schlegel’s remark was a judgment on the French Revolution itself. The social and political transformations wrought by France’s revolutionary experience in the late eighteenth century had, he believed, brought about a corresponding change in the sentiments and perspective of the country, commencing a period in which interests, just as much as politics, were subject to “the hasty revolutions of the fleeting day” (Fritzsche 127). In Schlegel’s estimation, the French suffered from an acute cultural amnesia in which contemporary and momentary trends now took precedence over the historical and permanent, and this denouement was, he contended, a direct result of the political turmoil and upset that had come to radically transform conventional understandings of time and society in the wake of the Revolution.

Although Schlegel’s insights may have possessed a detached and analytical quality common to a foreigner’s encounter with a society different from his own, such interpretations were certainly not lost on French observers. Over a half-century after Schlegel’s Parisian sojourn, the critic and philosopher Hippolyte Taine readily agreed with the observations made by the German intellectual. The French public interminably clamored for the “new, salient and unexpected,” he complained, while treating the past with disregard and boredom (Taine, *Essais* 380). What was true of fashion was equally true of politics, in Taine’s opinion. “We demolished the past,” he claimed while speculating on the impact of the French Revolution, “and all had to be done over again” (Taine, *Notes* 126). Severed from their roots, the French could only appreciate the transitory and contingent, seeing behind them a past of ruin and destruction with little consequence in the here and now. “In France, we are neither reformers nor *réformés*,” the Saint-Simonian mystic Prosper Enfantin conceded in 1840. “We love new habits and have no desire for patching up old holes” (Saint-Simon and Enfantin 32: 47).

Desire for novelty (*nouveauté*) encouraged a certain distaste for the old and *passé*, and this sentiment was as true of fashion as it was of physical places. Building projects during the middle of the century in French cities proceeded with little concern for the historic and familiar. Feeling nostalgic on a clement afternoon in the autumn of 1864, the journalist Victor Fournel decided to walk across Paris and revisit a small house which he had frequented on occasion in the past. “I wanted only to stroll by on the pavement slowly,” he claimed, “raise my eyes to the third floor and look at the place” (Fournel 77). Arriving at the location, the

journalist was appalled to find that where the building had once stood was now a vacant lot covered with a fresh layer of smoldering tar. “Even the street had disappeared,” Fournel remarked in near disbelief as he surveyed the area (77). The experience of the writer and renowned gastronome Charles Monselet was hardly any different. The Paris that he had come to know and love was quickly vanishing in the midst of state efforts to beautify and modernize the city: “day by day, the streets are disappearing, the buildings known for their history [*ancienneté*] and the memories associated with them are being demolished” (Monselet 2: 43). The modern was, in Monselet’s conjecture, a beast devouring history and memory that would, in time, efface all that had come before it.

Detached from the past, life, opinions, and perspectives in France became preoccupied with the “ephemeral, fugitive, [and] contingent”—elements which the critic Charles Baudelaire intimately associated with the advent of *la modernité* (Baudelaire, *My Heart* 37). Homilies to the modern and professions of faith in the “modern spirit” resonated amongst an entire generation and found expression in a variety of cultural, social, and political projects throughout the nineteenth century. By mid-century, French outlooks revealed an infatuation with a cult of the modern, a trend first announced in the frenzied summer of 1789 when revolutionaries set out to break irrevocably with the past and create a radically new type of society with no historical precedent. In his *Dictionnaire de la langue française* published in the 1870s, the positivist philosopher and lexicographer Émile Littré listed the word “*modernité*” as a neologism dating from the late 1860s first coined by the literary critic Théophile Gautier (Littré, *Dictionnaire* 4: 3932). In actuality, Gautier had employed the term at various times over the previous decade in his reviews, applauding works that were “of [their] time” and, by consequence, pregnant with elements of “*modernité*.”<sup>1</sup> Yet Littré was, nonetheless, correct in accenting the word’s neologic quality, identifying it as a distinct product of a culture and period captivated by all things new and modern. “Modernity immediately seduces us with its intrinsic charms,” admitted the literary critic René Doumic at the turn of the twentieth century, “deriving from a secret conformity with our tastes” (Domic 925). For Doumic, a writer who came of age in an intellectual milieu where modernity not only symbolized an idea but a complete way of life and thinking, the appeal of *la modernité* was a given.

Words are a particular type of cultural artifact. They not only give insight into the sentiments of the age in which they were produced but also offer a window into the conceptualization and ordering of an entire mental landscape constructed and

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<sup>1</sup> *La Presse*, 23 November 1853.

assembled through speech (Foucault xv-xxiv). The fact that intellectuals and elites began to think and speak in new terms of time and temporality did not imply there existed some transcendental meaning or truth within their judgments or that modernity had simply arrived at a given time (Le Goff 25). The increasing penchant to interpret the world in qualitatively different terms from the past and identify certain attributes, sensibilities, and outlooks as inherently “modern” were products of a culture and cultural vocabulary that prized all that was modern to the exclusion of the *ancien* and obsolete. This style of language and representation possessed, moreover, a specific social context and import as well. It constituted a discourse employed primarily by cultural and political elites of the period who came to interpret the modern in accordance with their own social expectations and worldview. It was telling when the anarchist poet Arthur Rimbaud sneered at the pretense and smugness of bourgeois society in one of his poems during the 1870s, remarking sarcastically that in France “one must be absolutely modern” (Rimbaud 89).

Rimbaud was one among many French intellectuals who, whether in laudatory or deprecatory terms, saw fit to equate the bourgeois with all that was modern. Such perceptions have been sustained in contemporary analyses as well, with purportedly “bourgeois” forms of culture, sociability, and productivity standing as definitive traits of modern life and society (Clark 50-70; Gaillard 267-70; Walton). The import of this bourgeois modernity has, moreover, informed the perspectives of so-called “modernization theorists” who have laid emphasis on the role capitalism and industrialization—the twin hallmarks of a nominally bourgeois society—have played in a universal modernizing process (Moore; Kerr et al.). This narrative correlating capitalist development and industrial growth with modernity has rightly been criticized for promoting a vision of global homogenization and relying upon conceptions of a “modern” western identity with universal pretensions (Cooper 113; Tipps 199-226). One could equally accuse modernization theorists of replicating the discourse of nineteenth-century elites who had no qualms with lauding the cultural and technological achievements of their own societies while condemning the savagery and backwardness of non-European cultures.

Within such perspectives, modernity has exceedingly amounted to a monolith shaped by a particular idea of society defined through its dynamic and innovative possibilities. This understanding fails, however, to recognize that modernity is the product of a certain cultural vocabulary that prizes and valorizes these exact qualities; in essence, that it was nominally “modern” societies which first articulated this very conception of modernity, seeing in it a reflection of their own

power, prestige, and eminence. In this respect, rather than a condition, modernity constitutes a particular way of describing and talking about the world that is, in its very nature, self-referential. As John Comaroff has pointedly argued, “in itself, ‘modernity’ has no a priori telos or content” (Comaroff and Comaroff 3). It is not an analytical category, but an “ideological formation” that is constructed and reproduced to revere certain practices and values while denigrating others (3-4).

Once modernity is stripped of its essentializing qualities, all that remains are the varying discourses, ideological forms, and cultural representations which give substance to this construction. The presupposed modern monolith vanishes, “melting into air,” as Marx would have it. In light of its ideological and discursive properties, modernity has perennially been tied to an idiom of newness prized by cultural and social elites in the western world. It has underwritten and sustained a particular type of discursive power capable of representing socially-particular behavioral norms and values in universal and humanitarian terms while furnishing a rationale for their forcible imposition on others. In its French variant, this universality has been intimately linked with the advent of bourgeois social primacy, making modern society virtually synonymous with the contours of a bourgeois worldview and ethos.

Although “modern society” did connote a world defined by certain “bourgeois” interests and aspirations, the coupling of bourgeoisie and French modernity frequently obscured the more nuanced relationship that existed between social identity and time in the nineteenth-century French imagination, and to conflate the two concepts would be erroneous. As late as the 1840s, Prosper Enfantin could claim that modern society remained vague and ill-defined, and this at a time when “bourgeois” had become a common facet of public and social discourse in France. In Enfantin’s estimation, modern society “demanded a new speech” if it was to become a salient and living idea (Saint-Simon and Enfantin 33: 28). The development and elaboration of this “new speech” that would construct, convey and discursively possess modern time and society was still in the making at mid-century and it would not be until bourgeois identity underwent a crisis that prevailing views of modernity and modern society would become staples of nineteenth-century French public and cultural discourse.

In France, the bourgeoisie never accommodated the strict social schema proposed by Marxist philosophy. Whereas Marx saw the bourgeoisie as an explicit social group brought into existence by industrialization and the accumulation of capital, such socio-economic interpretations did not necessarily gel with the realities

of nineteenth-century French economic and social development.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the century, French industry progressed at a relatively slower pace in comparison to Great Britain and the United States, and the preservation of more traditional forms of artisanal manufacturing matched with a primarily agricultural economy entailed that a bourgeois class controlling the means of production was largely absent in France (Maza 3-4, 162-66). This is not to suggest that the term “bourgeois” had no relevance for French society. Indeed, the character and origins of the bourgeoisie was widely debated and speculated upon throughout the early nineteenth century (Seigel 89-96). Yet “bourgeois” rarely constituted the class of producers and entrepreneurs that Marx believed to make up the new ruling class in industrial society. Rather, it connoted a mark of social distinction which encompassed a broad array of French property owners, men of affairs, and political elites (Garrioch 266). “The bourgeoisie is not a social class,” the historian Jules Michelet aptly noted in 1846, “but a position within society” (Michelet 132).

The social pedigree associated with the rubric “bourgeois” was, by and large, a product of the political environment of the mid-nineteenth century. The political and social antagonisms stemming from the French Revolution persisted to agitate France well after the revolutionary movement came to its ambiguous close, and in the midst of such extreme unrest, traditional and established elites nurtured strong misgivings regarding the impact and consequences of democratic equality and popular sovereignty. Providing a case for the exclusion of the masses from politics, liberal ideologues warned of the deleterious influences that universal democracy and social equality posed for the stability of French society. “It is false that all men are equal,” François Guizot, one of the foremost liberal spokesmen, explained in 1863. “They are, on the contrary, unequal by nature as by situation, by spirit as by body” (Guizot 1: xxi). Highlighting the “organic inequality” which existed in nature, liberals argued that not all possessed the necessary intellect and “*capacité*” to participate in public life (Dury 1: 55). Education, wealth and social distinction exhibited one’s ability to make judicious political decisions and conceptualize the greater social good outside of personal interest, and these qualities formed the basis of an open aristocracy which politicians and liberal critics associated directly with a new class in France, the bourgeoisie.<sup>3</sup>

In the discourse of classical French liberalism, “bourgeois” demarcated an exclusive social group with political rights granted by virtue of their wealth. The mandatory poll tax required for voting and holding political office effectively

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<sup>2</sup> See Marx, *Class Struggles in France*, and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

<sup>3</sup> See Rosanvallon 99-144; Maza 147-50; Pitt 1040-41; and Hulliung 47-50.

restricted political power to a small minority of the population, with references to the bourgeoisie serving to justify the type of elite rule prescribed by liberal ideology. As the liberal Charles de Rémusat asserted in 1834, with the ascension of the bourgeoisie to political power the middle class had been elevated to “a civil church [befitting] their true social rank.”<sup>4</sup> Such pronouncements gave substance to claims of bourgeois primacy and power during the mid-nineteenth century, defining a new aristocracy of probity and talent naturally suited for political leadership. “The bourgeoisie occupies the front of the stage in France,” one critic bluntly put it in 1837, “just as democracy does in the United States” (qtd. in Rosanvallon 120). Much as Sarah Maza has indicated, the French bourgeoisie was a product of a particular style of political discourse and language, one which constructed an image of the moderate and rational “bourgeois” individual and justified claims to power and authority (Maza 158-60).

Not surprising, opposition to the egregious class rule sanctioned by liberals encouraged a strong anti-bourgeois rhetoric which further gave definition, albeit in exceedingly negative and pejorative terms, to the idea of the French bourgeoisie during the 1840s. Increasing demands for political reform and democratization signified the most pronounced threat to elite power, culminating in the outbreak of a social revolution in 1848 which successfully challenged the dictates and ideology of bourgeois rule. With the declaration of universal manhood suffrage and the founding of a democratic republican regime in February 1848, the nominally bourgeois class of privileged voters which had constituted the backbone of the government’s support was swallowed up by the majority of peasants and workers virtually overnight. “If universal suffrage is admitted,” one journalist had warned as early as 1833, “the middle class disappears completely from the political scene” (Popkin 98). So it was. Under the new republic, the language of social status and superiority employed by French elites was annulled, marking an end to the world of bourgeois privilege and exclusivity. “The bourgeoisie is dead,” Flaubert wrote while reflecting on the trend toward democracy taking place in the country. “It is now seated there amongst the populace” (Mélonio 211).

The advent of mass democracy brought into existence a new public discourse oriented around themes of equality and national sovereignty. In this milieu, the overt elitism and class rule promoted by liberals became unsustainable. “There is no longer in France . . . either a bourgeoisie or peasantry,” the political theorist Édouard Laboulaye remarked in 1863 when summing up the tenor of the new

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<sup>4</sup> Archives Nationales [AN] 87 AP 15, “Discours prononcé par M. De Rémusat,” 14 March 1834.

egalitarian political culture emerging in the country. “These are the names of old things long dead. In France there is only a single order and a single people. We are all citizens to the same degree” (Laboulaye x). While elites hardly became ardent democrats overnight and in most cases continued to express concerns that mass democracy would jeopardize public order, the demands of a democratic political culture made defining a class of capable and natural leaders problematic. Democratization necessitated a new type of elite distinct from the notions of natural inequality and social privilege familiar to classical liberalism. If elites intended to maintain their influence, they would have to devise a new language and terminology capable of representing their identity and interests in accordance with the democratic aspirations of the period. The severe blow struck to classical liberalism in 1848 entailed a necessary reformation of bourgeois ideology, engendering a need to conceal real social relations and represent politics and society without regard to social division (Rosanvallon 347-49).

*Tout court*, the advent of mass politics did symbolize the death of the bourgeoisie in France, as Flaubert anticipated. Confronted with a political culture prizing democracy and equality, elites could no longer represent themselves as an exclusive and particular “bourgeois” social group standing above the people. Over the course of the 1850s and 1860s, allusions to “capacity” or bourgeois primacy gradually became replaced by references to “modern society” and “modern civilization.” Unlike the terminology previously employed by classical liberals, modernity constituted a novel way of describing and labeling that relied upon themes of time and development rather than social and class distinctions. This shift from the social to the temporal accompanied a broad cultural transformation in which bourgeois identity gradually became supplanted by a universal modernity as elites espoused a new language and style of representation conforming to the demands of a democratic society. In this context, to speak of bourgeois modernity is a misconception. Modernity was the cultural construction that eclipsed the bourgeoisie within public discourse and inscribed elite identity within a new discursive framework.

### **Imagining the Modern Community**

In 1867, Raimond de Miravals arrived in Paris from the Var, a Provençal department nestled in the extreme south-east corner of the country. A journalist by trade, Miravals was serving as a correspondent for the *L’Echo du Var*, a local newspaper which had assigned him to report on the Exposition Universelle being

staged in the capital that year. Like so many others who attended the Exposition, Miravals expressed admiration for the industrial and scientific exhibitions flanking the Champs du Mars and rhapsodized on the “new era of civilization and progress” opening for humanity. The Exposition equally inspired an appreciation for the inventive spirit of the modern era, in his opinion, demonstrating the triumphs made by industry, exploration, and scientific advancement in the nineteenth century. “Man is never satisfied,” he wrote. “The thirst for the unknown, the passion for travel, the rage for discoveries which each day breed uncertainties and invite new problems: I succumb to this constant inclination which is especially the inclination of the current century” (Miravals 149, 101).

Public reception of the Exposition had been a chief consideration of the planning committee formed to organize the event. According to Victor Duruy, a leading committee member, the Exposition was intended to bolster awareness of French industry and science and reveal to the world that “the innumerable riches of industry come out of the chemists’ laboratory and the cabinet of physicians and naturalists like a river flowing from its source” (Duruy 1: 204). Educated Frenchmen hardly needed to be informed of this fact, however, as science, industry, and manufacturing had already come to comprise a new trinity of progress in their minds, conjuring up images of a world rife with promise and unimaginable potential. “It is not an exaggeration to say that science contains humanity’s future,” claimed the theologian Ernest Renan, “that it alone can speak the words of destiny to him and reveal the way in which to reach his end” (Renan 38). Renan’s veneration of scientific advancement epitomized the “cult of science” currently in vogue among French intellectuals of the period. “Ask any good Frenchmen what he understands by ‘progress,’” opined Baudelaire. “He will answer that it is steam, electricity, and gas—miracles unknown to the Romans—whose discovery bears full witness to our superiority over the ancients” (Baudelaire, *Art* 126).

The sense of rapid change and novelty seizing the French imagination found expression in a wide array of publications and genres, underscoring feelings of transcendence and restless energy. While the poet Victor Hugo extolled the panorama of modernity he found growing up around him, describing a world “whose arteries are railroads and whose nerves are electric wires” (Hugo 301), expressions of wonder could be and often were tempered with more melancholic reflections as well. Gazing upon a landscape of castles and crumbling monasteries, the conservative royalist Pierre-Simon Ballanche mournfully concluded that “these black towers crowned with crenellated stones must fall, these silent, tapering cloisters must be transformed into prisons or vast workshops for manufacturing.

Our castles represent the time of knights and the feudal world. It is necessary that they disappear” (Ballanche 2: 84). Flaubert expressed the same sense of dislocation in his novels, albeit with more panache and artistic flair. In *The Sentimental Education*, he chose the image of Jesus Christ riding a steam engine through a virgin forest to symbolize sentiments of rapid change and novelty, conveying the impression of an irrevocable break with standard traditions and perceptions (Flaubert, *Sentimental* 325). In this melange of things dead and things yet to be, the present appeared to the poet Alfred de Musset as a creature “half-mummy and half-foetus.” “One cannot know,” he lamented, “whether, at each step, one is treading on a seed or piece of refuse” (Musset 8-9).

Reflections on industry and science underscored the idea that the nineteenth century marked a period of unprecedented change and transformation. Such assumptions were commonly reinforced through observations on city life and urban environments where the vista of modernity seemingly came alive. Walking through Rouen, a traveler could find gothic spires, old churches, and gable-ended houses adjacent to billowing smokestacks, newly-constructed train stations, and the skeletal silhouettes of industrial cranes stenciled against the skyline (Blackburn 189). Ruminating on French building projects in colonial Algiers, the military interpreter Ishmayel Urbain complained, “Soon the traveler will only find here a detestable copy of our French cities where the preoccupation of work and the noise and smoke of industry do not permit any repose or distraction.”<sup>5</sup> A walk through the streets of Paris in the 1860s elicited a similar experience. “This modern Paris . . . is a strange and totally new world . . .,” Taine surmised, “[where] the nervous machine is at once overworked and insatiable” (Taine, *Essais* 373, 378-79). As industrial and economic growth began to slowly transform the character and ambience of urban spaces, cities increasingly appeared to embody all the marvels as well as the vices of modern society, rendering the city the veritable locus of modernity.

Writers spared no amount of ink when it came to detailing the modern landscape coming into sharp relief around them, mixing lamentations for a certain way of life coming to an end in France with eulogies welcoming the arrival of a world vastly different from the past. Yet the world is not, as Leszek Kolakowski has indicated, reflected and “reproduced” in words and texts; on the contrary, it is “appropriated” and actively shaped through them (Kolakowski 35). “Modern society” came alive through the words and imaginations of authors. Exposés, magazine articles, and illustrations functioned as vehicles for the spread of these new sentiments, outfitting readers with a vocabulary and contextual understanding

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<sup>5</sup> *Journal des Débats*, 21 July 1839.

that transformed the modern into a collective and shared experience. To sketch the contours of a nominally modern world through language and texts was to give it a definition and reality of its own which an educated and literate French population could identify with, relate to, and comprehend. It is the world of words, Slavoj Žižek maintains, which creates the world of things because reality cannot represent itself. Social reality is constantly and necessarily mediated through the language which gives it symbolic meaning, shaping and dictating interpretations of society, history, and the world at large (Žižek 28, 45-49).

The textual nature of the modern signified, however, that it remained by and large the property of a narrow segment of the population. Books and newspapers were expensive in the nineteenth century. The average subscription rate for a journal cost between sixty and eighty francs at a time when agricultural workers earned no more than two francs and skilled workers no more than four francs per day (Collins 91; Price 160, 215). Most publications remained beyond the means of workers and day laborers, even if they had the necessary literacy skills and leisure time to read them. As a primarily elite medium, texts reflected intellectual currents, social concerns, and topics of interests pertinent to educated society and readers. It was, therefore, unsurprising that convictions regarding the utility of scientific knowledge, the inexorable march of progress, and the benefits of industry pervaded numerous journals, revues, and books of the period. Philosophical musings, reports on industrial innovations and the economy, descriptions of urban life and sociability: these subjects were both topical and attractive to an elite readership increasingly encouraged to view their world as the *nec plus ultra* of man's endeavors and accomplishment.

"The true bond," Flaubert once wrote, "is that of language" (Flaubert, *Flaubert* 161). If "modern society" acquired its consistency in the realm of print, such representations similarly encouraged readers to associate and identify with these abstractions. To be "modern" implied participating in a certain culture and ascribing to a set of beliefs, values, and practices shared by other like-minded individuals. Commonalities and mutual interests compelled men to think of themselves not necessarily as compatriots or social equals but as coevals inhabiting the same temporal and modern space (Fabian 23-30). Time, represented through a language of modernity, forged a bond between contemporaries, providing the basis for a type of "imagined community" which, constructed through the writings and declarations of cultural and political elites, became integral to one's identity,

persona, and expectations.<sup>6</sup> There could be no foreigners among modern men because modernity professed a certain uniformity of moral sentiments, outlooks, common interests and experiences that bound coevals across both space and time. The praises sung to “modern society” composed the backdrop of a new social imaginary complete with its own discursive forms, identities, and nuanced implications that were increasingly becoming central to the mental universe and parlance of elite society.

The vista characteristic of the modern, continually produced and reproduced in the books, journals, and revues of the day, nurtured an understanding of the world that permeated the cultural discourse of nineteenth-century elites. In accenting the common culture, interests, and sentiments shared by “modern” individuals, educated elites were instructed to view themselves as coevals inhabiting a unique time vastly different from the past. Such assumptions furnished a measure of social cohesion amongst a diverse stratum of society that defied the neat socio-economic homogeneity familiar to Marxist interpretations of the bourgeoisie. In the mentality of mid-nineteenth-century educated society, change and progress became definitive features of a collective modern experience.

### **At the Margins of Modernity**

Arriving in the Algerian port of Sorta in 1860 to commence a six-week journey through North Africa, Charles Thierry-Mieg, an Alsatian inventor associated with the French textile industry, took note of the “uncultivated, savage, primitive and inhospitable” environment surrounding him. A week into his trip, he traveled from Guelma to Constantine where he found an empty and desolate landscape like no other he had ever encountered. “More and more the surrounding landscape acquired a strange character. There were only barren and earthy hills, occasionally dotted with stones and slabs of rock. . . . A gray and arid surface, burnt soil, hardened by the pitiless summer, this desert that seemed condemned to perpetual sterility.” Happening upon a throng of Arab tribesmen, Thierry-Mieg could not help but regard them with a sense of historical distance and detachment. “They are still in the Middle Ages,” he recorded soberly; “their degree of civilization has remained the same. . . . Whereas we have progressed the Arabs have remained stationary” (Thierry-Mieg 6, 102, 169).

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<sup>6</sup> I borrow this term from Benedict Anderson, whose principle focus concerned the imaginary and discursive nature of national identity and the nation-state. See *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

While such observations were commonplace and testified to the Euro-centric and implicitly racist views inscribed within French colonial discourse, there remained something more to Thierry-Mieg's assertion that the Arabs had remained "stationary" while Europeans had progressed. The French and the Arabs inhabited, he presumed, two divergent and qualitative times, prompting Thierry-Mieg to differentiate between the modern and progressive time of Europe and the medieval and static time of the Orient. Flaubert expressed a similar sentiment during his trip to Egypt in the late 1840s, remarking on the decadence and mystique of "the old Orient, land of religion and flowing robes" (Flaubert, *Flaubert* 73). Drawing liberally upon anthropological theories and orientalist stereotypes popularized throughout the nineteenth century, depictions of "the other" routinely took the form of temporal distance, offering a mirror image of the modern self.

Building upon the theories of leading anthropologists, critics and intellectuals readily subscribed to the belief that human development followed certain universal laws, construing the technological, social, and intellectual disparities evident among differing cultures in evolutionary and stadial terms. The world was best understood, they argued, as a temporal mosaic in which less civilized and primitive societies coexisted alongside highly-developed and modern ones. In a world configured through notions of temporal pluralism and uni-linear evolutionary models, to encounter the primitive was tantamount to coming face to face with one's distant ancestry and traversing the centuries and millennia bounding a common genealogy (Matsuda 12; Furet 4). It was through this understanding of the primitive that the possibilities of the modern came into sharp relief and assumed form, that men recognized themselves as eminently modern and superior. The modern man may have believed himself to be centuries ahead of the "savage," but these conceptual distinctions belied a troubling interdependence: the modern man needed the savage to imagine his own existence and identity. Conceptually, these identities may have been mutually exclusive; in reality, however, they operated as part of the same discursive formation. Elite self-fashioning not only demanded a conception of the modern to valorize and celebrate; it equally required an object against which the possibilities of the modern could be projected and exemplified.

As identities became increasingly mapped and constructed according to concepts of time and temporality, labels such as "primitive" and "savage" became integral to the cultural vocabulary of nineteenth-century elites and served to reconfigure both racial and social differences in new and vital ways (Wilder 124-29). The old language of "bourgeois" industriousness and capacity employed by liberal ideologues to justify their brand of class rule in France proved adaptable to

the new tone espoused by elites and accommodated the needs of racial subjugation and subalternization essential to shaping power relations in France's emergent colonial periphery. According to the Martinican medical expert Étienne Rufz in 1860, the "savage" found beyond the confines of Europe possessed "a horror of work" which perpetually left him deprived of the benefits of modern society.<sup>7</sup> It was not shocking that Hommaire de Hell, a colonial reformer disposed to see "the Negro [as] essentially lazy," would insist that to "moralize this race . . . there is only a single path: *work*."<sup>8</sup> Self-identified modern men insisted they possessed the intelligence and work ethic essential to a productive society while less-evolved cultures stagnated due to sloth and ignorance, demonstrating, as Littré asserted in 1867, that "work"—that cardinal virtue of the bourgeoisie—comprised "the base, the law, the glory of modern humanity."<sup>9</sup>

If "bourgeois" had implied a restrictive social identity and elite group in France that no longer comported with the dictates of a new democratic political culture, ostensibly bourgeois values increasingly came to be expressed in universal terms, and concepts like modernity and civilization furnished a persuasive means of discursively representing this universality (Popkin 70; Rosanvallon 347-48). It was not surprising that the "civilizing" and "modernizing" objectives of French colonialism corresponded with certain "bourgeois" interests predicated upon economic development and improvement (Abi-Mershed 13). Yet this modernizing initiative was hardly restricted to the distant worlds of the colonies. The landscape symbolic of modern progress and industry vaunted by savants, intellectuals, and politicians never extended far beyond the domains of French cities and towns, and *la France profonde*—the majority of rural areas making up continental France—could, at times, seem closer to the desolate and wild terrain of Africa than Europe. Visiting the department of the Landes located in the south-west in 1856, an education inspector submitting a report to Paris depicted a desolate landscape, noting, "the eye loses itself as in an ocean, never encountering any habitation and seeing only forests extending far without limits."<sup>10</sup> The supposed pre-modern milieu of the colonies was not all that distinct from the under-developed and "savage" landscapes characteristic of the French countryside, and state administrators throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century were never modest when it came

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<sup>7</sup> *Bulletins de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* 1: 349.

<sup>8</sup> Hommaire de Hell, *Revue de l'Orient* 8: 225; *Revue de l'Orient* 9: 44.

<sup>9</sup> Littré, "Politique," *La Philosophie positive*, 1867, 1: 28.

<sup>10</sup> AN F 17 9327, "Rapport général des la statistique de l'enseignement primaire dans le departement des Landes," 1 May 1856.

to noting the vital need of modernizing rural French society. “It is essential that not a single corner of French soil be bereft of these grand currents of richness and prosperity,” the interior minister, the Duc de Persigny, dictated in 1856. “In a word, French civilization is still incomplete; it is necessary to bring it to fruition.”<sup>11</sup>

Perceptions of rural autarky and backwardness suffused travel accounts through the countryside during the nineteenth century as rail construction and roads opened up *la France profonde* to urbanites, and the sense of foreignness at home that such encounters engendered was telling. Village and city, just like metropole and colony, represented, as the economist Adolphe Blanqui claimed in 1851, “two completely opposite ways of life” (qtd. in Weber 9). This opposition remained tied to conceptual and qualitative differences that mapped out modern and pre-modern spaces. If French cities were hailed as bastions of modernity, the provinces were popularly seen as static and resistant to change. Writing in the mid-1860s, the liberal pamphleteer Eugène Ténnot clearly saw “two juxtaposed people” living side by side on the national soil, “one burning with a new spirit, the other languishing in another century” (Ténnot 13). Urban observers regarded French rurals with the same detachment and distance applied to colonial subjects (Lehning 3-4). Observing the prandial habits, dancing, and festivities of Breton peasants in Rennes, Taine compared them to Arabs celebrating after a feast, remarking curtly, “mores remain very primitive here.” Heading southward to Toulouse, the native inhabitants of the region became even more peculiar. “In seeing them move and approach,” he noted, “one feels that they are in the presence of another race” (Taine, *Carnets* 58, 77).

Social critics had few reservations in applying anthropological and colonial categories to their fellow Frenchmen and blurring the conceptual boundaries that separated metropole and colony. Often exaggerated and erroneous, these representations did serve an important ideological function. As the antithesis of the modern individual, peasant and indigene alike could not logically be expected to possess any agency in the nominally modern society envisaged as the repository of the future. “Progress and amelioration cannot be achieved by the initiative of society in its entirety,” the republican social critic Grégoire Wyruboff explained in 1868. “They must be the work of some individuals who are enlightened enough to understand necessity and strong enough to vanquish the passive resistance of an immense majority that ignores the path it must walk.”<sup>12</sup> Rejecting the explicit class rule prescribed by French liberals, “enlightened” individuals claimed their authority

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<sup>11</sup> AN 45 AP 19, “Discours au concours régional de Roanne,” May 1864.

<sup>12</sup> Wyruboff, “L’enseignement libre,” *La Philosophie positive* 2: 451-52.

in the name of “modern society” and progress, concepts which did not, at least theoretically, undermine the egalitarian values of a democratic French society. Inscribing difference within a discourse of time and development had the benefit of eliding and altogether glossing over social and racial distinctions, underwriting a style of social representation which was egalitarian in principle while elitist in practice. Social evolutionary thinking consistently remained premised upon the belief that less-evolved peoples could, under the proper circumstances, catch up with and be assimilated into the modern time of their superiors. As one pro-colonial publicist alleged in 1867, “by adopting the methods employed by the people furthest along the path of progress . . . a retrograde people can make up the ground and diminish the sacrifices that lost time has imposed on them” (Étourneau 136). Phrased differently, primitizing certain groups offered a moral justification for imposing certain values and social practices on outside cultures.

“Nothing can hold back modern thinking, progressive civilization and progressive science,” Littré professed in 1852. “At each step, in spite of the numerous incidences or misfortunes which may befall a particular nation, we see that innovation advances and backwardness declines” (Littré, *Conservation* 90). The logic of a universalized modernity imbued elites and social reformers with a profound sense of moral authority and purpose, encouraging hopes that rudimentary and “savage” groups would adopt the lessons of their modern counterparts and progressively abandon their archaic and “primitive” qualities. In the terms prescribed by the new language of French elitism, subaltern groups were faced with the choice of assimilation or social marginalization. In either event, the imposition of modernity implied that the new society to come would unconditionally belong, both socially and culturally, to a certain group of men bolstering urban forms of politics, knowledge, and sociability under the pretext of modernity.

### **The Archeology of Modernity**

The existence of social groups is dependent upon the discourses and narratives that shape them (Maza 6-7). Yet in a political culture predisposed to view social hierarchies and distinctions with suspicion, the traditional means of articulating group and social identities necessitated a new style of social representation. Modernity offered both a compelling language and story for conceptualizing a particular culture and lifestyle in temporal and historically-specific terms, permitting self-fashioned modern men to express their superiority and social primacy within the framework of a nominally egalitarian culture and polity. The

idiom of newness popularized in nineteenth-century France helped construct a series of social and geographic boundaries which organized identities and power relations in a society being transformed by democratic politics and revived colonial aspirations. As elites began to speak through a language of time and temporal distance, they gave embodiment to the idea of an imagined modern community, furnishing notions of a shared time and culture which would provide a measure of cohesion amongst a diverse stratum of society that defied the socio-economic homogeneity central to Marxist interpretations of the bourgeoisie.

Resting upon a conceptual antinomy between the “modern” and “primitive,” temporal identities offered an effective rationale for a new form of discursive power that eschewed direct references to categories of class and race and collapsed them within a discourse of time that assigned a leading role to self-identified vanguards of progress and human development. Accusations of deficiency and social atavism made up a common language of exclusion and ascribed subaltern identities to those who remained hopelessly out of touch with the currents of industry, science, and progress valued by urban elites. Inscribed within these juxtapositions and temporal identities was, therefore, a powerful legitimization for forms of social power and control that deviated from the established discourse of French liberalism and bourgeois primacy. If the dictates of modernity have conventionally implied a marked “bourgeois” worldview and ideology, this denouement invites a more nuanced appraisal. In the outlooks of French social and cultural elites, modernity signified the absence of an explicitly bourgeois world, even if only to reinterpret bourgeois identity, interests, and values in exceedingly universal and oblique terms.

At its most elemental level, “modern society” signified a rejection of the cultural pluralism and diversity that exist in the present, contrasting a monolithic modernity against a variety of superannuated and historicized forms. Construing identities and social relations through notions of anthropological time, the new language of elitism transformed outside cultures and societies into little more than artifacts destined to be effaced by the progressive movement of history, a process broadly understood as the colonization of primitive spaces by modernity. Universal in its scope and conceptualization yet emblematic of a minority of the population, modernity constituted the exclusive preserve of a privileged group invested with a mission to modernize the primitive and conscript outsiders into the confines of modern life.

Up until relatively recent, scholarship on modernity remained in the shadow of this modern monolith, denoting a process patterned on European economic and social development during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Giddens 1). Yet

as Timothy Mitchell has observed, one of the chief characteristics of modernity has been its “autocentric picture of itself as the expression of a universal certainty” which has largely relegated non-Western countries to the margins of history (Mitchell xi). It might be added, moreover, that this narrative was largely prefigured by nineteenth-century actors who used similar criteria to construct and articulate their own modernity against the “savage” and “primitive” others they found surrounding them. To dissect the ideological dimensions of modern time and assess how historical actors utilized temporal conceptions to orient and structure their world is also to challenge the essential chronologies which have underpinned our categorization of historical phenomena. Such a methodology not only has the potential to illuminate the power structures inscribed in our understandings of modern time, but also portends to liberate modernity from its Euro-centric tyranny organized around themes of development, modernization, and capitalism. While such a history may, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has claimed, “look towards its own death,” it also holds the potential of dispelling the myths of the Enlightenment and imaging the world in new and radically heterogeneous terms (Chakrabarty 31, 46).

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