



## CHAPTER 4

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# Discontent with Modernity

The current study is somewhat unusual, in that the very existence of the problem it addresses (the decline of the West) is controversial. If one considers the major human problems that capture academic attention—for example, poverty, war, crime, drug addiction, and so on—it is apparent that they do such great and obvious harm that there is little need to justify researching them. But when the decline of the West is broached—for example, it is argued that in some critical respect(s) or “all things considered,” Western civilization is or has been worsening—things are not so simple.

As it happens, something of a cottage industry in academic publishing has sprung up in the past few decades, which has the goal of demonstrating that pessimists about the future of the Western world are totally in error. According to the optimists behind this scholarship and research, not only is Western (and perhaps even global) life *not* degrading, it is now as good or better than it has *ever* been, and it seems likely to grow better still (maybe indefinitely)—a view that one can reasonably term “progressivism.”<sup>1</sup> Notable books advancing this basic argument, or something close to it, include Ben Wattenberg’s *The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong* (1985), Christian Welzel’s *Freedom Rising* (2014), Hans Rosling et al.’s *Factfulness* (2018), Indur Goklany’s *The Improving State of the World* (2007), Johan Norberg’s *Progress* (2016), Matt Ridley’s *The Rational Optimist* (2010),

<sup>1</sup>It is “progressivism” because it involves the belief that Western (or even global) society has developed for the better and will continue to do so, that is, belief in *progress*.

and Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) and *Enlightenment Now* (2018).<sup>2</sup>

The great virtue of these optimistic works is their firm reliance on empirical data. Sociologists, and certain other social scientists, have the unfortunate tendency to bring little to their ambitious synoptic theorizing about “modernity” other than intuitions and vague impressions (e.g. Giddens, 1991). Academic projects that engage the “grand questions” of traditional sociology—among which some version of “Is life getting better or worse?” can be counted (Rosa, 2015)—with scientific rigor are thus refreshing and welcome.

In (for the most part) expertly marshaling a welter of empirical facts in defense of progressivism, the optimists have established<sup>3</sup> beyond reasonable doubt that the *material* quality of contemporary Western life is unsurpassed, thanks primarily to industrialization. By historical standards (and certainly those of premodern “state” societies), infant mortality has never been lower and, even controlling for changes in such mortality, life expectancy has never been higher; aggregate wealth is unprecedentedly high; and violent crime, famines, and plagues are relatively rare.<sup>4</sup> The basic picture that allegedly emerges from these trends is that life is now very *secure*, and so a narrow day-to-day focus on survival is no longer essential—resultantly, existential horizons, that is, people’s choices and opportunities for living their lives, are enlarged, and human happiness and satisfaction have risen (supposedly) with this increasing autonomy (Inglehart, 2018; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2014). Unsurprisingly, these changes, occurring predominantly but not exclusively in the West, have apparently gone in tandem with an increasingly non-competitive social *ethos*, one in which maximizing pleasure or *enjoyment of life*, and thus living as one desires, is prioritized above objective success or achievement, such as earning the pride of one’s parents (Minkov, 2011; Welzel,

<sup>2</sup>Heiner Rindermann’s *Cognitive Capitalism* (2018) offers a similar argument. But unlike the other books mentioned, a positive assessment of (aspects of) modernity is incidental to CC’s thesis, which concerns the sources of variation in levels of modernization across nations. Moreover, CC’s prognosis for the West is not particularly optimistic.

<sup>3</sup>Admittedly, the optimism cottage industry has been most prolific in recent years, and little of what its members have to say is original. A fairly comprehensive review of the evidence for human “progress,” encompassing everything from early hunter-gatherer bands to highly modernized Western societies, is available from Sanderson (1999).

<sup>4</sup>The case for the decline of war, which Pinker (2011, 2018) has perhaps most famously made, while, in the main, correct, may be exaggerated (see Mann, 2018).

2014). Indeed, among sociological variables, it is this *indulgent* attitude and a sense of control over one's life that most strongly predicts cross-national variation in "subjective well-being" (or SWB, which includes happiness and a sense of satisfaction with one's life ["life satisfaction"]; Minkov, 2011).

The basic dynamic, then, is as follows: industrialization, by enhancing material standards of living, redounds to "existential security" (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), enabling people to explore and pursue their own fulfillment (desires, goals, etc.) rather than collectively struggle for survival; this relaxed survival pressure and concomitant growing demand for personal satisfaction shifts cultures in an indulgent or *hedonistic* direction (Inglehart, 2018; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2014). Some further theorize that such attitudinal developments bring individuals to demand political and institutional changes that will foster and protect autonomous life, such as democratization (Inglehart, 2018; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2014). We refer to this cascading process of social evolution simply as *modernization*—correspondingly, "modernity" is the sociocultural condition in which this process has at least started.<sup>5</sup> In all of the optimistic books enumerated above, something like this account of modernization is provided. Further, all of them treat modernization as the reason that contemporary life represents the peak of the human condition.

### CONCEPTUAL TERRAIN

Before examining this optimistic narrative in some detail, certain aspects of how the "progress" question is approached in the literature bear mention. This is in part necessary because progressivists regrettably tend to treat modernization as an undifferentiated phenomenon in examining its benefits, which is not a tenable analytical choice. Pinker (2018), whose work is criticized at length in the following chapter, may be the worst offender in this regard. Even a casual read of his latest pro-modern book, *Enlightenment Now*, reveals that he fails to offer any promising theory of the origins of modernity, and (relatedly) of which elements of modernity are to be credited, individually or collectively, with bringing about the

<sup>5</sup>"Modernity" is understood in a variety of different ways, differing especially across academic fields. For historians, modernity is simply the time period beginning around the end of the 1400s (the start of the Early Modern Era) and extending into the present (which is within the Late Modern Era).

various goods (e.g. low infant mortality) that he celebrates. (Rosling et al., 2018 is also theoretically crude in this way.<sup>6</sup>) The upshot is that, for Pinker (2018), modernity is what one might call a “package deal”: if societies that tend toward irreligion also are more “humanistic” and peaceful, the former tendency “plausibl[y]” causally contributes to the latter (p. 439); if, internationally and temporally, wealth positively predicts population-level SWB,<sup>7</sup> variation across countries in SWB can be attributed exclusively to variation in socioeconomic development (pp. 262–289); if education tends to promote secularization and individualizing<sup>8</sup> (what Pinker

<sup>6</sup>By contrast, Rindermann (2018), via rigorous theoretical and statistical analyses, offers a highly persuasive theory of the origins and “active ingredients,” so to speak, of modernity.

<sup>7</sup>As we will see later, the claim that growth in GDP predicts rising happiness is probably false, contra Pinker (2018) and other optimists.

<sup>8</sup>Although touched on earlier, in considering the political views associated with the different moral foundation’s clusters (individualizing vs. binding), it is important to understand the psychology of the “left-right” divide, which does not lend itself to an uncontroversial explanation. Some argue that this divide has become irrelevant or nearly so in recent decades (de Benoist, 1995; Milbank & Pabst, 2016). Still, persistent use of “left” and “right” as moral-political classificatory terms suggests that they continue to capture something important. The primary basis of the left-right split seems to be egalitarianism, or the idea that equality (moral, political, economic, and/or whatever) among some class of people (increasingly, all humans) should be promoted, or should at least factor into decision-making in morally consequential domains (e.g. it might be argued that the basic moral equality of persons should constrain political decision-making). (As noted earlier, differential concern for avoidance of harm and for compassionate treatment of others seems to be another basis of the left-right divide, with leftists exhibiting more of such concern than rightists, although more so in contemporary contexts [it does not seem, for instance, that Soviet communists were much interested in avoiding harm to others].)

Leftists need not treat equality as the most important value, contra Paul Gottfried (Hawley, 2016). But leftists do see equality of one sort or another (but almost always of economic resources, political power, quality of life, and/or interpersonal respect), among *at least* all members of a national community (but often far more people, even including everyone on Earth), as either *intrinsically* good or, in some sense, morally required. Contrariwise, rightists give equality far less moral salience, more commonly understanding it as having *instrumental* value at best, but not as good in itself or morally required (except in cases where equality, of whatever kind, would apply only to much more limited sets of people than entire national communities; nevertheless, certain rightists, particularly some Christians, may view all persons as having some sort of fundamental equality in terms of basic moral worth—intuitively, however, one would think that this makes them less right-wing than they would be without that belief). It must be again stressed that many or most so-called rightists of the contemporary West are more reasonably classified as leftists (Salter, 2018) given the definition just provided, for example, most “right-wing” libertarians. They are “right-wing” in contemporary times, not because they ascribe minimal moral significance to equality (how-

presumptuously calls “enlightened”) political/moral attitudes, that is because cognitive sophistication simply disfavors religiosity and rightism and promotes their opposites. The problem with these arguments is that they are made in ignorance of evidence that contradicts them: at the individual level, irreligion is negatively associated with prosocial psychology and behavior (even after many relevant variables are statistically controlled; Figueredo et al., 2007; Wright, Beaver, Morgan, & Connolly, 2017), making it difficult to consider non- or anti-religious attitudes as *direct* sources of moral betterment among individual persons (more on this in Chap. 5); genetic, rather than socioeconomic, factors probably explain a substantial amount of cross-population variability in SWB (Minkov & Bond, 2017; Proto & Oswald, 2016; Woodley & Fernandes, 2014); and intelligent people in the *contemporary* West may be inclined away from rightism and religion not because these belief structures offend rationality, but for culturally contingent reasons (Woodley of Menie & Dunkel, 2015).

Such evidence is perhaps ignored in that it is convenient for pro-modern types—who seem overwhelmingly to tend toward the world-historical left—to construe modernization as a purely *environmental* phenomenon, all benefits of which are inextricably clustered together. In this way, they can assert or imply that modernization can be brought to non-modernized societies (e.g. via institutional change promoting economic development) and that achieving maximum well-being for members of advantaged majorities somehow requires, however circuitously, that the equal standing of disadvantaged minority groups be promoted. For the pro-modernists, there is, in other words, one path to modernization, which is necessarily a totalistic phenomenon the various constituent elements of which collectively advance the basic goals of those committed to individu-

ever conceived), but because they are among those persons who do not give equality sufficient moral pride of place (sufficiency here being determined by current moral norms). But for our purposes, it is the left-right dichotomy, as just specified, that is relevant; to avoid confusion, we write, and have written, of the “world-historical” left and right because only quite recently in historical time, and mostly in the Western world, does it seem that egalitarians have started to identify or be classified as “right-wing” in large numbers (Salyer, 2018).

It should also be observed that this definition of the left-right split is not completely adequate because, for example, traditional Marxists are uncontroversially leftists but are not committed to thinking of equality in moralistic terms by virtue of their Marxism. In practice, however, it seems indisputable that leftists overwhelmingly tend to have *moral-psychological* commitments to equality of some kind(s), including Marxists especially (Gregor, 2012). For our purposes, it is the psychology of left and right that is key, and so the non-moralistic quality of orthodox Marxist theory is not particularly troubling.

alizing moralities: equality, freedom (understood as broad horizons of choice), cosmopolitanism, and the like.

There is no solid justification for understanding the various outcomes of modernization as neatly compatible, however. It is probably true, for example, that certain *sequelae* of economic growth are antagonistic to such growth: Longitudinal data indicate that the emergence of welfare states in Scandinavian nations has decelerated the latter's economic progress, consistent with the predictions of standard economic theory (Sanandaji, 2015). Similarly, modernization is associated with growing tolerance of out-groups, which enables mass migration and the related phenomenon of multiculturalism; but ethnic and cultural diversity are associated with reduction in the levels of social trust within nations (Putnam, 2007; Rindermann, 2018). Impeccably mainstream academics have noted that this loss of trust potentially endangers the very tolerance on which mass migration and multiculturalism depend (e.g. Dinesen, Schaeffer, & Sønderskov, 2020; Kaufmann, 2019; Kaufmann & Goodwin, 2018). Put simply, separate aspects of modernization may undermine each other. Moreover, certain elements of modernization may have costs and benefits that are quite unevenly distributed—this might be true of the high levels of ethnic and cultural diversity found in many Western countries (Rindermann, 2018; see also Woodley of Menie, Peñaherrera-Aguirre, et al., 2018). Any study of the effects of modernization should, then, strive to disentangle the causal effects of the process' myriad parts.

Additionally, the effects of modernization may be welcome or objectionable, or some combination, in a variety of ways. Pro-modernists are seemingly inclined to assess modernity with narrowly utilitarian and presentist criteria, which could be captured in, for the sake of simplicity, a question such as, “Are people living more comfortable and satisfying lives in recent years compared to [some time in the past]?” But it is clearly possible that that which promotes happiness at one point could engender misery at another. The research on general intelligence mentioned in the Introduction illustrates that possibility: War and novel environmental challenges to survival and reproduction historically advantaged the fitness of Western European groups and individuals high in  $g$ . These selective processes, at the group and individual levels, raised the average  $g$  of Western European peoples, rendering them sufficiently intelligent to produce an industrialized society for the first time in human history (Woodley of Menie, Figueredo, et al., 2017). In less scientific terms, one might say that the wealth and comforts of industrial (and postindustrial) life were

paid for with the blood of countless Europeans who failed to pass through these group- and individual-level selective filters. Industrialized existence has massively relaxed these selective pressures, which may be the primary reason that contemporary Western life is in so many respects pleasant. But one effect of this evolutionary shift has been to *reverse* selection on *g* (Reeve, Heeney, & Woodley of Menie, 2018; see Chap. 8). Even if one wholeheartedly approves of modernized life, there is every reason to be worried about this development. It is not prudent to be concerned only with how good things are now or have been recently—the question of sustainability is no less important, but progressivists seem to give it short shrift. Indeed, almost none<sup>9</sup> of them has even addressed the problem of falling heritable general intelligence and many other undesirable trends in human psychological traits, despite almost certainly, in some cases, knowing about these (see the following chapter on Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now*).

There is then of course the question of which sociocultural changes ought to be considered “good” or “bad” (or given some other axiological judgment) and why. This book is not a work of philosophy, so we do not attempt to answer those questions. We are, however, mindful of the fact that such normative judgments are highly variable among individuals (Haidt, 2012), across space and (probably more so) over time (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), and try to make some sense of the sources of such variation. Furthermore, we are aware of the fact that the axiological beliefs of individuals, and the broader moral-ethical characters of populations expressed in cultures, are not causally isolated from, *inter alia*, genetic and sociological factors (Gladden & Cleator, 2018). Indeed, it is quite plausible that the collective moral and other normative beliefs of populations have some relation to group-level fitness. Such belief clusters could, in fact, partially indicate the fitness of populations, that is, constitute group-level fitness indicators. For example, there is strong evidence that liberal and irreligious moral cultures go with low group-level fitness, insofar as these cultural qualities are strongly associated with sub-replacement fertility rates (Faria, 2017; Woodley of Menie, Sarraf, et al., 2017). From these possibilities and observations, we infer that it is unwise to reflexively privilege the favored moralities of modernized societies over others. Insisting

<sup>9</sup>One exception to this silence on the problem of selection against intelligence among progressivists comes from the work of James Flynn (2013). But Flynn’s views on this matter and other trends in intelligence, at least in 2013, have not withstood the test of time (see Chap. 8).

on such moral views may lead us to ignore apparent problems—for example, high rates of childlessness—that pro-moderns, given their moral presuppositions, are likely to trivialize or dismiss.<sup>10</sup> And as already suggested, it should not be ignored that what is good to one is often, or often accompanies, what is bad to another. The indulgent/hedonistic values that attend modernization, while strongly positively associated with SWB (Minkov, 2011), enable lifestyles, behaviors, and cultural mutations that are (aesthetically and morally) repellent to many people, especially those with pronounced binding moral orientations (Haidt, 2012; Kalb, 2008; Simpson, 2015). It is an act of simple ideological prejudice to reject out of hand the moral beliefs and attitudes of such individuals.

### DOUBTS: NIHILISM AND PESSIMISM

Turning now to an examination of pro-modern narratives, a first apparent problem with them is that they do not sit easily with many of the most prominent accounts of the modern condition—accounts that have accumulated since the onset of industrialization in Europe (although some accounts appeared earlier and accurately anticipated what was to come in crucial respects). These different views of modernity often do not flatly contradict each other, but the less sunny ones indicate a variety of problems to which their pro-modern counterparts are blind. (For ease of exposition, these alternative perspectives on modernity are called *pessimistic*, and their proponents *pessimists*.)

The very existence of these pessimistic views hints at an intriguing aspect of modernization, which is the tendency of modernized societies to produce some of the most vociferous critics of modernity itself, as indicated in the previous chapter. Even many notable non-Western enemies of modernity find some of their greatest intellectual support in Western figures. This seems to be true of certain radically anti-modern Islamic political movements, some leaders of which explicitly credit the German philosopher Martin Heidegger for having helped reveal “the toxicity of Western civilization” (Duff, 2015, p. 7). By contrast, at least

<sup>10</sup>For example, concern for personal autonomy may lead pro-modernists to embrace and celebrate rather than lament childlessness; indeed, a connection between sex-egalitarian ideas—which certainly comprise an element of the modernization syndrome (Inglehart, 2018)—and efforts to reduce fertility and “control” population size have been well documented (Cherry, 2016, p. 144; p. 130, n. 32).



some pre-industrial societies appear to be or to have been remarkably free of such social/cultural dissidents. It has been documented that certain hunter-gatherer societies, despite their (on modern standards) extraordinarily low material quality of life, exhibit this absence of cultural division:

Ethnographers report a distinct lack of a discontented minority in band [hunter-gatherer] societies ... Contemporary ethnographic accounts—of the smallest-scale societies—almost universally confirm positive attitudes among group members. Hill and Hurtado ... write, “Among the Ache, there were no revolutionaries, no visionaries, and no rebels. Joking and happy-go-lucky demeanor were universal.” (Widerquist & McCall, 2017, p. 179)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Edgerton (1992) challenges this view, collecting many examples of pre-industrial, including hunter-gatherer, societies in times of extreme misery, as well as cases of members of such societies who found the latter repugnant and/or felt alienated from them and the like (Hallpike, 2018 offers other reasons for pessimism about the quality of life in non-state pre-industrial societies). Edgerton’s basic point is that it is a mistake to think that evolution adapts populations to ways of life such as to render them basically content with them.

It is admittedly difficult to evaluate the literature about the quality of life in hunter-gatherer and other non-state societies, since it presents a highly varied set of mostly qualitative investigations of sometimes very diverse populations—for example, some pre-industrial non-state societies have been documented with levels of violence below those found in certain modernized societies, but other pre-industrial non-state societies have been studied with levels of violence far above what is typical of modernized ones (Widerquist & McCall, 2015, 2017). It does seem to us that Widerquist and McCall (2017) present a very evenhanded survey of the available evidence and are far more sanguine in their conclusions than Edgerton (1992), who seems to have deliberately focused on the worst the pre-industrial world has (and had) to offer. Further, it is not always clear what caused the suffering to certain societies that Edgerton documents—in some cases, one suspects that negative effects from surrounding modernizing/modernized societies may have been to blame—or how accurately his isolated examples of discontent reflect the quality of life in the society generally. Moreover, for all his pessimism on the matter, he concedes that “[w]e are likely to think of people in small, traditional societies as being emotionally and psychologically committed to their way of life, and in fact this is often the case ... Even the miserable Ik of Uganda, who were quite literally starving to death when Colin Turnbull visited them in the mid-1960s, preferred to stay together and die rather than move away from their sacred mountain in search of food and survival” (Edgerton, 1992, p. 148). And while Edgerton points to certain instances of high suicide rates in non-state societies as evidencing despair and societal dissatisfaction, Widerquist and McCall’s (2017) more current and seemingly comprehensive and balanced review mentions that “[s]uicide tends to be very low or even negligible in stateless societies” (p. 147).

Far more controversially, this relative paucity of dissidents seemingly held in medieval societies, and societies with a roughly medieval “model” in some cases. The sociologist Luciano Pellicani (2003), despite his evident pro-modern attitudes,<sup>12</sup> observes that trends heralding the advent of modern society, chiefly the appearance of capitalism, seem to have generated entirely historically novel revolutionary activities opposed to these developments<sup>13</sup>: “It is no coincidence that the first signs of the extraordinary events accompanying revolutionary movements should have emerged with the introduction of capitalism in

Kaczynski (2019) presents what might serve as a counterpoint to some of Edgerton’s observations, noting a variety of instances of hunter-gatherers and other non-state people unifying through and taking great pleasure in circumstances that modernized people would overwhelmingly consider horrific. Consider one case that Kaczynski offers (from writer Gontran de Poncins), which in a key respect parallels that of the Ache quoted in the main text above:

[T]hese Eskimos afforded me decisive proof that happiness is a disposition of the spirit. Here was a people living in the most rigorous climate in the world, ... haunted by famine ...; shivering in their tents in the autumn, fighting the recurrent blizzard in the winter, toiling and moiling fifteen hours a day merely in order to get food and stay alive ... [T]hey ought to have been melancholy men, men despondent and suicidal; instead, they were a cheerful people, always laughing, never weary of laughter. (Poncins, cited in Kaczynski, 2019, p. 160)

One fact that could have serious negative implications for quality of life among hunter-gatherers is the non-monogamy and strikingly lopsided reproductive participation ratios that have been found in some of their populations, favoring female over male reproduction (Brown, Laland, & Mulder, 2009). Although it has been asserted that hunter-gatherer populations tend to be highly monogamous, or at least that some are (e.g. Hallpike, 2018), genetic evidence does not align with this claim. For example, Lippold et al. (2014) find that far more females than males have participated in reproduction in human evolutionary history, and since hunting-gathering was the only subsistence paradigm for most of that history, this strongly suggests that Brown et al.’s findings accurately indicate a positive association between non-monogamy with high female/low male reproductive participation and hunter-gatherer life. The reduced mating opportunities for men in these societies reasonably count against the aggregate quality of life of hunter-gatherers—but it should be noted that such severe sexual selection likely helped to keep burdens of deleterious mutations low (see Chap. 6).

<sup>12</sup>See Pellicani (1998). Pellicani’s pro-modernism is quite principled because he is fully aware of many of the serious problems with modernity.

<sup>13</sup>Pellicani (2003) quotes Alexis de Tocqueville’s description of “revolutionaries” who “came into being” with the French revolution as “of a new species, never before seen.” This species was “still before our eyes” in Tocqueville’s time.

European society”<sup>14</sup> (p. 11). He further maintains that capitalism’s “rapid weakening of the spirit of loyalty and tradition” (2003, p. 21) enabled such revolutionary projects.<sup>15</sup> Pellicani’s view is consistent with historical evidence of strong general loyalty to medieval ways of life among industrializing European populations. For example, perhaps the leading contemporary historian of the Holy Roman Empire (HRE), Peter Wilson, writes that the Empire:

fostered a deep-rooted, conservative ideal of freedom as local and particular, shared by members of corporate groups and incorporated communities ... [L]iberals discovered that ordinary people often did not want their version of liberty, because uniform equality conflicted with treasured corporate rights which appeared to offer superior safeguards against capitalist market exploitation. Later problems stem at least partly from how those corporate rights were stripped away amidst rapid industrialization and urbanization after the 1840s. The attachment to corporate identities and rights helps explain why the Empire endured despite internal tensions and stark inequalities in life chances. (2016, pp. 12–13)

Having given that description, Wilson is quick to assure readers that the HRE “was [not] a bucolic, harmonious old-worldly utopia” (2016, p. 13). While the need to insert that qualification tells one something about the general sense of life in the HRE that Wilson offers, it should be stressed that, consonant with his remark, the point here is *not* to suggest that the worlds of European medievals and hunter-gatherers were/are free of strife or violence. We have already seen that Medieval European and (in some societies) hunter-gatherer life was/is very violent relative to their modernized counterpart (Chagnon, 2013; Eisner, 2003; Widerquist & McCall, 2017). But violence and strife alone do not imply opposition to the basic

<sup>14</sup>Pellicani’s (2003) study is relatively obscure, but is nonetheless recognized by Roger Griffin, a leading scholar of revolutionary totalitarian ideologies, as a “masterpiece” (2012, p. 32).

<sup>15</sup>Pellicani’s account is, in ways, similar to A. James Gregor’s (2012) analysis of the rise of Russian socialism, which notes that “[populations displaced from rural to urban settings were d]isengaged from traditional roles, and traditional moral constraints, [making] such population elements ... available for mobilization” (p. 90). Gregor goes on to observe that Russian revolutionary intellectuals were not always optimistic about their ability to radicalize the peasantry—but peasants nevertheless were ultimately essential to the Russian Revolution, seemingly because their opportunities to participate in traditional life became seriously limited, facilitating their exploitation by the intellectuals.

character of a culture and/or society—they do not alone suggest the presence of “revolutionaries” or “visionaries.”<sup>16</sup> Reynolds (2010) indicates this distinction in noting that her “impression is that, despite the recorded radicalism of a few rebels, most of [those at the bottom of medieval society] demanded justice *according to existing norms* and greater participation within *existing structures* rather than anything entirely new [such as claims to equality and democracy]” (p. 124; emphasis added). Her observations clearly accord with Wilson’s finding of broad commitment to the social order of the HRE among “ordinary people” even after the spread of liberalism in central Europe.

A further example comes in the form of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In his study of a half-century period in the life of this settlement, from 1630–1680, historian Allan Carlson (2017) describes the society achieved as having exhibited a “remarkably stable social order” (p. 1) and its members as akin to “medieval peasants in a new land” (p. 5). The Colony, rather than having a basis in “individualism and liberalism,” maintained a vision of collective existence that was “more ‘atavistic’ [and] ‘folkish’ ... organic in nature” (Carlson, 2017, p. 6). Life was organized around “nucleated towns’ [that] were ‘small, intimate, and essentially cooperative’ places” (2017, p. 7). Most strikingly, for the Massachusetts Bay Puritans, “righteousness ‘became another name for conformity’”: “Obedience to town authority grew out of covenants freely embraced, among a largely homogeneous people. In these ways, Puritans’ loyalty to their small towns provided the same kind of identity as had provincial loyalty back in England” (2017, p. 7).

Thus, the collective impression that the historical record gives is that the *revolutionary* posture vis-à-vis society and culture is largely a modern phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> One might be tempted to mention the Reformation as a

<sup>16</sup> In Pellicani’s (2003) view, the uneducated and ignorant status of medieval populations has some role in explaining the apparently low rate of ideological revolutionaries that they exhibited. But he also treats the discontent of intellectuals with the movement away from traditional social life as perhaps the major driver of pre-industrial revolutions with an ideological character, indicating that the problem may have had less to do with levels of education than the attitudes of those who were educated. Gregor’s (2012) account of the Bolshevik revolution (about which see the prior note) seems consistent with the view that malcontent intellectuals wield disproportionate influence in political revolutions, and that it is their reaction to certain social conditions rather than the mere fact of their having formal educations that explains their discontent.

<sup>17</sup> To be sure, Pellicani (2003) and others have documented revolutionary and millenarian movements in the Middle Ages. But they contend that these movements were typically a

clear example of ideological division in Medieval Europe. But this example does not contradict the general account so far sketched: As Pellicani (2003) observes, “[a]ntagonism between the feudal system and the capitalist system’ was at the origin of the Reformation ... the Reformation was an anticapitalist movement” (p. 17). Revisionist histories of the Reformation that are now viewed as legitimate (though certainly not uncontroversial) among historians emphasize that the movement may have had, at least for a great part of its duration, little in the way of organic support from the unremarkable people forming the base of Western European societies, who were frequently strongly committed to Catholicism (Duffy, 2005). Rather, it appears that “declassed intellectuals” (Pellicani, 2003, p. 17) and political actors (e.g. Henry VIII in his quest for centralized power; Duffy, 2005; O’Connor, 2017) were key to the broad success, in Catholic Europe, of the Reformation—it was *not* “achieved on a tidal wave of *popular* enthusiasm” (Duffy, 2006; emphasis added).

All of that said, one should wonder what relevance any of it has to *contemporary* societies that are well modernized. Perhaps early capitalism and industrialization were widely experienced as traumatic and unwelcome, but the West of the twenty-first century is no longer in the throes of such profound socioeconomic transformations. To belabor a point, the standards of living of Western nations are unmatched, and these same countries maintain hedonistic cultures that may be a necessary condition of the West’s singularly high average levels of SWB (in the global context). Remarkably, however, despite the fact that all of those claims are true, the “professional revolutionaries” that Pellicani (2003) documents—that is, those who “[embrace] revolution as a *Beruf* ... [whose] disenchantment with the world makes [them] ... [incapable] of accepting reality, [such that they aspire] to build a completely new world ... in which everything will comply with desire” (p. ix)—have not disappeared. Some of the starkest evidence supporting this statement comes from Gross and Simmons (2007), who find that 50–60% of American professors in the social sciences and humanities politically identify as “Marxist,” “activist,” or “radical.” Even the

response to fundamental changes undoing the “traditional” quality of medieval societies, chiefly, to repeat, the emergence of capitalism. Given that capitalism, especially industrial capitalism, is the sociological root of modernization, we treat it as a “modernist” phenomenon. In any case, however, note that Reynolds (2010) indicates the relative insignificance of revolutionary movements in the medieval period where she writes of “the recorded radicalism of a few radicals” (quoted in main text).

staunchest defenders of modernity, such as Pinker (2018), acknowledge that these “professional revolutionaries” are still with us, primarily in the form of intellectuals and academics. But progressivists have all signally failed to convincingly explain this persistence. Pinker (2018, p. 447), for example, relies on the arguments of Thomas Sowell and Paul Hollander, who contend that intellectual disdain for capitalist modernity lies in the fact that the cognoscenti do not feel that they are accorded sufficient esteem in the modern world. This explanation seems to us to capture an element of the truth, but has some apparent problems. For instance, academics are often highly paid, and that professorships carry high occupational prestige. Perhaps recognizing the limitations of that hypothesis, Pinker (2018) goes on to write that intellectuals’ simple abhorrence for the cultural tastes of normal people may account for their anti-modernism. But Pinker does not bother to explain the provenance of that abhorrence.

The failure of modernity to win the allegiance of the intelligentsia is seemingly unexplained. This phenomenon is made all the more mysterious by the fact that the early *apparent* economic justifications for anti-capitalism, and therefore a substantial component of anti-modernism, in the industrial era were quickly discredited—indeed, in the lifetimes of Marx and Engels, it was clear that their predictions in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* were fantastically wrong (Boyer, 1998). Where in Western Europe, Marx and Engels predicted “immiseration,” there in fact followed sharply rising prosperity, but this did nothing to quiet their hatred of industrial societies<sup>18</sup> (Boyer, 1998; Gregor, 2012), even as it largely eliminated popular support for the revolution that they desired (indeed, the comfortable citizens of wealthy Western nations have, on the whole, no substantial interest in upsetting the economic system that has enabled their prosperity, and have long since lost connection to the traditional lifeways that might have given non-economic reasons to oppose capitalism). Opposition to the modern world has outstripped any material deprivation that may have once been its seeming basis. We submit that this stubborn persistence of anti-modernism—lasting, as noted above, into the

<sup>18</sup>It should be stressed that Marx and Engels believed capitalism was a necessary precursor to socialism in a broader process of societal economic evolution. There is thus *some* sense in which they were not anti-capitalists. Nonetheless, they inveighed against capitalism with profound and moralistic rage, making it difficult to avoid the conclusion that they hated this economic system (Gregor, 2012, p. 85).

present—constitutes a real problem in need of explanation: it is not something to be merely hand-waved away.

In light of this, a good point of departure in critically analyzing the progressivist narrative is the complaints against modernity that intellectuals have forwarded—what about the modern world do they oppose? It should first be noted that critics of Western modernity could be split into at least two camps: those on the political right and those on the left. Affinities between leftist and rightist anti-modernisms are substantial (Pellicani, 1998, 2012), leading some to question the utility of the left-right distinction (e.g. Gregor, 2009). For example, both left- and right-wing critics of Western modernity have attacked this sociocultural epoch as spiritually or existentially draining through its rationalized management of social life (Pellicani, 1998).

Nevertheless, and as Pellicani (1998) is aware, leftists and rightists do not make the same appeals in advancing their critiques. For rightists, it is modernity's tendency to liquidate traditional cultures and hierarchies, heroic virtue, and masculine power that is most objectionable (Furlong, 2012; Skorupski, 2015). For leftists, concerns about generalized domination and inequality, and also (oddly enough, given the hedonistic nature of modernized societies) repression of "sensuousness," tend to pervade their attacks on modernity (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2009; Marcuse, 2006; Zerzan, 2002). Pellicani (1998) fails to highlight the stark differences between the kinds of societies that leftist and rightist anti-modernists prefer. Whereas rightists typically want to restore elements of the Western past, such as traditional Christianity, high in-group homogeneity, and strongly normative monogamy, leftists would fulminate against such "atavistic" developments. Marcuse (2006) and other key enemies of Western modernity in the Frankfurt School, for instance, clearly sought anything but a return to tradition. Instead, they aimed at establishing an "erotically fulfilled, socialist society" (Gottfried, 2017, p. 7), in part because "the Freudian Left/Frankfurt School" believed in an "intimate connection between sexual repression and authoritarianism"<sup>19</sup> (Adamson, 2017, p. 23). It is hard to imagine a right-wing critic of modernity longing for a

<sup>19</sup>The Frankfurt School was, and remains, aggressively anti-fascist and anti-National-Socialist in reaction to the Holocaust. Wolin (2004, p. xi) quotes perhaps the most noted figure of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno, as having written the following: "Hitler has compelled humanity to accept a new categorical imperative: orient your thinking and acting so that Auschwitz would never repeat itself, so that nothing similar would recur."

sybaritic world that caters to “sexual fantasies” à la “Cultural Marxist” intellectuals (Gottfried, 2017, p. 60).

It would be reasonable to argue that “anti-modern” leftists, despite their disapproval of modernized Western societies, are not in any deep sense anti-modern. That is because the moral culture of the modernized West has the effect of promoting the equal and maximum freedom of persons to be as happy, fulfilled, or satisfied as possible (Kalb, 2008; Rubin, 2015). Greater overall human happiness has been described as the “promise of [the] Enlightenment” (Veenhoven, 2015; though to this we should add “greater freedom”). The “anti-modern” complaints of Western intellectuals are thus made in the very “grammar” of modernized morality—their objection seems to be that the West, if anything, is not modernized enough, not free, equal, or happy enough. True anti-modernism, in the sense of a rejection of the moral and other ideological underpinnings of distinctly modernized life, seems to be the preserve of the right.<sup>20</sup> This follows from the fact that, again, the (world-historical) right is not interested in happiness or equality, and in fact often sees endeavors to achieve these outcomes as indications of cultural decadence (e.g. Weaver, 2013). Rather, it seeks cultural excellence, human virtue, and so on. One could say that the right values that which promotes or indicates the flourishing (and thus fitness, though rightists are usually unaware of this) of groups, whereas explicit pro-modernists (and many or most [at least contemporary] leftists) in the end value human satisfaction and its equal distribution among persons (within certain limits<sup>21</sup>).

As we will eventually see, the story of leftist “anti-modernists” is not this simple. Indeed, it appears that their opposition to modernity is not

<sup>20</sup>There are complexities here, however. Ohana (2019) distinguishes “modernity” and “Enlightenment,” the former referring to the condition in which humankind aims at shaping its own nature and destiny as it (or some or all of its various constituent groups) desires and the latter referring to a “normative” outlook involving commitment to the equality and freedom of all people, as well as to progress through education and open “rational criticism” and ideological exchange (pp. 1–28). Pellicani (1998) elides this distinction, and we follow suit here, in that the only significant non-“Enlightened” (i.e. non-liberal-egalitarian) forms of modernization—fascism, National Socialism, and Communism—have all but disappeared. Even those nations that might appear to be following a path of modernization alternative to the liberal-egalitarian one, such as China, seem to be exhibiting the same cultural changes that have attended modernization in the West (Zeng & Greenfield, 2015).

<sup>21</sup>For example, liberals, about whom more will be said later, will only count as positive human satisfaction that is acquired without violating others’ rights, understood as restrictions on what can be done to those others.



consistent with their stated interests. But for now, it is rightist anti-modernists whose ideas will be considered at length.

One of the most recurrent themes of anti-modern rightist thought is that of *nihilism*. In its most basic sense, nihilism is simply disbelief in something. Thus, Joyce (2009) observes that, strictly speaking, atheists could be called “theistic nihilist[s]” (p. 213, n. 1). When it is typically used, however, “nihilism” refers to the belief or sense that human life, or at least one’s own life, is meaningless, in the sense that it lacks a purpose or a point (this is often called *existential nihilism*). Even this definition might be too narrow, insofar as the phenomenon that anti-modernists have in mind when they discuss nihilism does not seem to be restricted to those who explicitly believe or strongly feel that life is meaningless. A broader understanding of nihilism would seem to include people who lack strong commitments to anything other than their own enjoyment—those who, while contingently invested in relationships, ideologies, places, and so on, stand at a certain remove from them by virtue of caring about them in a limited way. The nihilist’s depth of investment or concern is restricted insofar as his ties to the world are matters of convenience, to be severed and replaced once they fail to sufficiently enhance personal psychological well-being.

The philosophers Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, both allied to the “extreme right” in that they were National Socialists, saw this withdrawal into personal interests as a manifestation of nihilism<sup>22</sup> (Dreyfus, 1993; Wittrock, 2014). Dreyfus (1993) understands Heidegger’s conception of nihilism to be basically continuous with that of another major German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche,<sup>23</sup> who also construed nihilism as a modern phenomenon: “Heidegger agrees with Nietzsche that ‘there is no longer [in the modern world] any goal in and through which all the forces of the historical existence of peoples can cohere and in the direction of which they can develop.’ Nihilism is Nietzsche’s name for this loss of meaning or direction” (pp. 290–291). Equating with nihilism this absence of a “goal” for “peoples” on the basis of which they might “cohere” again

<sup>22</sup>As intimated in the previous chapter, the sociologist Max Weber also understood nihilism, which he saw as a consequence of “disenchantment,” to involve a retreat into the personal realm, but he was not a rightist. Critically, however, Weber seemed relatively sanguine about individuals’ ability to draw meaning from the personal realm, though nonetheless regarded the loss of public sources of meaning as tragic.

<sup>23</sup>The nature of Nietzsche’s political beliefs is a matter of controversy among relevant academics. Nonetheless, he was clearly illiberal and inegalitarian.

suggests that, for these philosophers at least, meaninglessness has some intimate relation to a lack of connection between individuals and their broader “life worlds.” Indeed, Dreyfus (1993), expounding on Heidegger’s thought, goes on to note that “[i]n a non-nihilistic age there is something at stake ... But in our age, everything is in the process of becoming equal. There is less and less difference among political parties, among religious communities, among social causes, among cultural practices—everything is on a par, all meaningful differences are being leveled” (p. 291); “[w]hen everything that is material and social has become completely flat and drab, people retreat into their private experiences as the only remaining place to find significance” (p. 292).

For Schmitt, similar concerns applied. His critique of liberalism, a defining feature of modernized and many modernizing societies, is especially relevant here. Liberalism (which will be treated in more detail later in this chapter), to reiterate, is essentially the principle that governments should remain neutral with respect to the various ways in which their citizens may live their lives, within certain limited constraints.<sup>24</sup> This is sometimes referred to as neutrality vis-à-vis “views of the good life” or “comprehensive visions of the good,” and liberal theorists typically understand this neutrality as a means of avoiding deadly human conflicts that are so often rooted in religious and moral differences between groups (Simpson, 2015). What this commitment to neutrality entails and to what degree and in which senses a government must be neutral to be liberal are matters of contention among political philosophers and theorists (compare, e.g. Gaus 2011, 2016 and Kramer, 2017). But in the case of Schmitt’s work, liberalism is defined by its tendency to erode the distinction between “friend” and “enemy”: “According to liberals, it is not necessary or desirable for individuals to form groups constituted by friend–enemy distinctions. Liberals hold, rather, that all conflicts among human beings can, in principle, be solved through amicable compromise, as well as through the improvement of civilization, technology, and social organization” (Vinx, 2015, p. 30). In effect, liberalism creates or endeavors to create peace in part by “neutraliz[ing]” (Ci, 2015, p. 174) or rendering insignificant human differences, for it thus eliminates potential grounds of violent political or otherwise ideological conflict. Schmitt, in the end, thought this neutralization was undesirable because it would rob life of the “values

<sup>24</sup>These constraints limit one’s ability to interfere in the lives of others, for example, by killing them.

that would license risking one's own life, and thus give a meaning to one's existence that transcends the satisfaction of private desires" (Vinx, 2015, p. 30). So we see repeated in Schmitt's corpus the idea that a loss of collective or public meaning, and a resultant withdrawal into concern only with narrow personal interests, is a condition of nihilism.

It is rarely easy to determine if philosophical speculations of this sort track empirical reality. One way to *start* an inquiry into whether modernity engenders nihilism would be to determine if more modernized nations have greater proportions of citizens with nihilistic sentiments than their less modernized counterparts. At least two studies on this matter exist, from Oishi and Diener (2014) and Froese (2016) (though the relevant data in both come from Gallup). Both find that wealthier nations—national wealth being a strong proxy for modernization—have greater shares of their populations reporting a subjective lack of purpose in life. The differences among nations are quite striking—roughly 28% of the French lack a sense of existential purpose, whereas this is true of about 0% of the Senegalese (Oishi & Diener, 2014, p. 424). In a multiple regression analysis, Oishi and Diener (2014) found that differences in religiosity among nations were most predictive of variation in levels of existential purpose, whereas other variables, such as individualism, were not predictive.

The fact that differences in religiosity but not individualism were predictive of levels of meaning in life cross-nationally may seem to bode poorly for the German philosophers' general conception of nihilism described above. However, measures of individualism (and its opposite, collectivism) are generally poorly specified and inconsistent, failing to correlate strongly with each other (A.J. Figueredo, personal communication). Frequently, they track attitudes, such as positive self-appraisals, that seem to have little to do with the phenomena that interest the theorists of nihilism. In the absence of sound individualism-collectivism measures, another approach is to focus on aspects of the syndromes of values and behaviors that are strongly associated with different measures of economic development—that, in other words, track a society's level of modernization.

Minkov (2011) has identified the key dimension, for current purposes, along which relatively less compared to more modernized societies vary, which he calls Monumentalism-Flexumility. More premodern societies are relatively "monumentalist," with "many people" who exhibit strong national and parental pride and "[i]mmutable identities, values, norms and beliefs, associated with strong religiousness" (Minkov, 2011, p. 97).

Monumentalist societies are further highly “cohesi[ve],” especially at the familial level, and exhibit low suicide rates—in fact, monumentalism is currently the best single predictor of national suicide rates, with which it strongly negatively correlates<sup>25</sup> (Minkov, 2011, p. 108). It would seem, then, that an aspect of the premodern syndrome of behaviors and values is a devout commitment to identity, kin, values, and religion. Conversely, societies that are high on “flexumility” are characterized, as the name suggests, by a combination of flexibility of identity and beliefs and modesty. These societies have generally higher suicide rates than more monumentalist ones. (One suspects that the deep, firm commitments that characterize monumentalism would militate against nihilism, especially given that religious commitment in particular is included in the construct—but an empirical study of this possibility should be conducted.)

\* \* \*

These contrasts between premodern and modern societies offer indications of the source of discontent that attends the former, but must be supplemented with certain other ideas. First, it is possible that the evolutionary value of intellectuals, and especially rare genius intellects, is substantially a function of inter-group conflict. Hamilton (2000) first proposed that geniuses have historically compensated for their low individual-level reproductive success (see Simonton, 2003) through the fitness benefits that they provide their groups in times of war—for example, military innovations that geniuses develop might provide decisive advantages allowing their groups to overcome enemies. To this, it should be added that even great works of art, inspiring religious sermons, and ingeniously crafted propaganda may serve to enhance intra-group cohesion and altruistic behavior. But with the rise of modernization and growth of wealth, intellectuals have been increasingly deprived of these roles given the concomitant attenuation of inter-group conflict, roles which they may well be genetically predisposed to occupy. This may explain what Pellicani (2003) describes as “[t]he sensation of profound alienation and impotence experienced by intellectuals [deriving] from the incompatibility between the role of spiritual leadership they aspire to fulfill and the specific nature of the social order that revolves around values and forces that are completely

<sup>25</sup> In Minkov’s (2011) analysis, once monumentalism is included, SWB is a weak predictor of national suicide rates (p. 108).

foreign to them. In this material world, pervaded by material values, intellectuals feel like aliens, who are unable to leave a mark on society” (p. 4). It may also account for the unique hatred of “decadent” capitalistic life among intellectuals that many authors have extensively documented (Stern, 1961; Watson, 2014). In effect, intellectuals may be divorced from their evolutionarily appropriate niche, a condition inducing dysphoria. The French fascist intellectual Pierre Drieu La Rochelle offered especially revealing statements on this score, expressing “his gratification at the way Hitler had managed, in his view, to lower consumption. He praised the historical phenomenon of Hitlerism for arresting the encroachment of European decadence, and envisioned it as an enlivening cure to the depressing complacency of the French Last Humans [i.e. Nietzsche’s last men]” (Landa, 2018, p. 290).

It would appear that liberalism, the influence of which has expanded in proportion to economic development (Inglehart, 2018), has historically been especially repugnant to many intellectuals, possibly for reasons that Schmitt and Heidegger identified: the tendency of liberalism to level the distinctions and neutralize the values<sup>26</sup> that provide a basis for inter-group conflict, thereby inducing nihilism. Liberals may respond to the complaint of intellectuals that liberalism is nihilistic by insisting that this is false, given that liberalism, in endorsing neutrality toward alternative values and ways of life, affords every person the ability to pursue his own vision of the good, and thus have a meaningful life. But if the liberal state is to succeed in avoiding the violence that emanates from *illiberal* commitment to belief systems and ways of life, then it has to cultivate in the general public a certain detachment from and unseriousness about all particular “visions of the good”—it cannot merely intervene in whatever conflicts do emerge, taking no steps to avoid them in the first place. Thus liberal governments aim to convince people, through, among other mechanisms, public education (Gottfried, 2002) that common humanity is the source of each individual’s (equal) moral worth, that differences of spirituality or religiosity or metaphysical commitments reflect mere personal preferences with no

<sup>26</sup>As we will discuss in Chap. 7, in recent decades political polarization has potentially started to increase in the Western world, which may signal the waning ability of liberal regimes to cope with rising genetic diversity in Western populations. It may nevertheless be that moderns remain without the deep commitment to their moral and political values that their premodern counterparts had.

bearing on anyone's goodness or value.<sup>27</sup> For many of the intelligentsia, liberalism thus offers an impoverished, even mutilated form of life, in which what we would naturally value most we are forced to value least (see Simpson, 2015). This may go a long way toward explaining the tremendous enthusiasm that, again, many intellectuals of the early twentieth century had at the prospect of a Great War (Stromberg, 1982; Watson, 2014; see Chap. 3), and that many other intellectuals had for the militaristic totalitarianisms that were to follow (Gentile, 2006; Gregor, 2012)—a number of these modern movements and revolutions, and even much earlier (though far more limited) ones apparent in times of upheaval in the Middle Ages, appear to have been directed as restoring a lost cohesion or groupishness (Pellicani, 2003; Stern, 1961).

But so far, liberalism has triumphed, and the discontent of the intellectuals has persisted. Set adrift from their martial purpose, the behavior and intents of the clerisy have grown ever more aberrant in historical context. Their hatred of the modern world less often takes the form of seeking to restore a premodern past, but instead aims at the dissolution of whatever remains of the traditional West (indeed, this is clearly apparent in leftist anti-modernism; Gottfried, 2002). In Chaps. 6 and 7, we offer an explanation of the evolutionary dynamics underlying this perversion of the typical stance of the intellectuals. But before proceeding, we think it necessary, in the next chapter, to consider at length one of the most visible recent cases for the view that anti-modernist complaints ought only to be rejected. Among other things, this will give us an opportunity to consider problems with modernity that pro-modernists, and not just discontented intellectuals, may recognize as such, but of which they currently tend to be unaware.

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<sup>27</sup> Again, the neutrality of such differences is in fact a basic tenet of liberal political philosophy (Ci, 2015).

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