

I

Untimely Knowledge

Antonio Gramsci, the twentieth-century Italian communist theoretician, may seem an unlikely defender of the benefits of a classical education. Nevertheless, like many radical thinkers of the previous century, he had followed a traditional curriculum in school and university, specializing in Latin and Greek grammar as well as linguistics and geography; like them, he drew from this education some surprising conclusions, using it as a basis for thinking about different aspects of contemporary society.¹ In late 1930, four years into his imprisonment under Mussolini, he turned his thoughts to the subject of the Fascist reform of the Italian educational system:

Schools were thus divided into classical and technical (vocational but not manual) schools, which called into question the very principle of the pursuit of general culture, of a humanistic orientation, of a general culture based on the classical tradition. This pursuit, once questioned, can be said to be destroyed, since its formative capacity was largely based on the general prestige enjoyed by a particular form of civilization. The tendency today is to abolish every type of school that is “disinterested” (in other words, not motivated by immediate interests) and “formative,” or else to leave only a scaled-down specimen of such a school for a tiny elite of rich persons and young ladies who need not bother with preparing themselves for the future.²

In the old school, then, the organizational structure itself provided an education. How? The study of Latin and Greek and other languages, together with the study of their respective literatures and political histories, was at the base of this mode of education. Its educative character came from the fact that these things were not learned for an immediate practical-professional purpose . . . One doesn't learn Latin and Greek in order to speak them, to become a waiter, or an interpreter, or whatever. One learns them

in order to know the civilizations of Greece and Rome, whose existence is posited as a foundation of world culture. Latin or Greek is learned by way of grammar, somewhat mechanically; but the charges of mechanistic aridity are greatly exaggerated. This issue concerns children; they should be made to acquire certain habits of diligence, precision, physical composure, mental concentration on particular objects. Would a thirty- or forty-year-old scholar be able to sit at a desk for sixteen hours on end if, as a child, he had not acquired “compulsorily,” through “mechanical coercion,” the appropriate psycho-physical habits? This is where one has to start if one also wants to bring up scholars, and pressure must be applied across the board in order to produce those thousands, or hundreds, or even just dozens of first-rate scholars that every civilization requires . . .

Latin is learned, and it is analyzed down to its smallest basic units; it is analyzed as a dead thing. This is true, but every analysis carried out by a child is bound to be an analysis of a dead thing. Besides, one must not forget that, wherever Latin is studied in these ways, the life of the Romans is a myth that, to a certain extent, has already interested and still interests the child. The language is dead, it is dissected like a cadaver, it is true, but the cadaver comes back to life continually in the examples and the stories. Could one do the same with Italian? Impossible. No living language could be studied in the same way as Latin: it would be or *would seem* absurd. No child knows Latin when he starts to study it with this kind of analytic method. A living language could be known, and it would take just one child who knows it to break the spell: everybody would rush to the Berlitz school. Latin and Greek appear to the imagination like a myth, even for the teacher.³

Gramsci’s discussion is one of many contributions to the long process of the revaluation of classical antiquity and its legacy. This was always a complicated issue; at least since the Renaissance, there has never been a time when classical knowledge has been wholly unproblematic, or when its value, and the nature of the benefits to be gained from acquiring such knowledge, could be taken for granted.⁴ However, it is generally recognized that the value attached to the legacy of antiquity has come under particular scrutiny over the last century or so; at the very least, ideas about *why* knowledge of antiquity might be useful or relevant, and the degree to which these ideas are accepted within society at large, have changed radically. Gramsci notes the prevailing preference in the early twentieth century for an “instrumental” approach to education, one focused solely on the immediate interests (primarily material) of society, resulting in the abandonment or degrading of the study of the classics. Even in the nineteenth century, writers had begun to argue against the dominance

of classics in the educational system, in favor of lessons that were more obviously and directly useful to the mass of the population.⁵ In the twentieth century the study of antiquity came rapidly to be seen as a luxury, scarcely relevant to present concerns, and this perception had direct implications for the place of classics in school and university education and in the culture at large.⁶

This can be seen as the triumph of “modern” over “ancient” knowledge, the closing stages of a conflict that dated back to at least the seventeenth century with William Temple’s “Essay Upon the Ancient and Modern Learning” and the subsequent scholarly debate. Modern mathematics, natural history, medicine, theology, history, and philosophy all claimed to have accumulated insights that went beyond – if not far beyond – those offered by classical writers; in subsequent centuries, disciplines like economics, offering ways of making sense of the world of which the ancients had never conceived, added to the clamor against the overvaluation of inherited knowledge and tradition. Increasingly, “modern” became a term of unequivocal approbation, denoting relevance and importance, rather than a neutral temporal description; in science, and increasingly in other disciplines, the most recent insights were usually valued more highly than those which they replaced. Modern knowledge was manifestly more useful and effective, as it transformed the present in visible, overwhelmingly impressive ways through the application of science and the rational organization of society and economy. It was natural, then, that modern knowledge should be preferred to the knowledge inherited from antiquity, and that the study of the society that had produced the works of the ancient authors should seem less relevant to the needs of modern society.

This is a familiar story for classicists, as are the arguments that can be marshaled against this attitude; Gramsci’s rejection of an instrumental, anti-humanistic approach to education, and even his recommendation of the study of the classics as a means of developing the “transferable skills” and discipline required for diligent scholarly work, find plenty of analogies in defenses of classical learning in more recent educational debates. However, it is Gramsci’s *defense* of the importance of studying the classical world that seems most telling. What is striking is his insistence on the absolute lack of any connection between antiquity and the present. The study of antiquity is useful, he argues, because antiquity is entirely dead. Its languages are a useful medium for education precisely because they are no longer living; the world of antiquity can be used as a subject of analysis and debate because it has no connection with the present. “One

does not study Latin in order to learn Latin; it is studied in order to accustom children to studying, to analyzing a body of history that can be treated as a cadaver but returns continually to life"; however, this history, this reanimated society, does not have any relationship to the life of the present, but exists simply as a set of stories and examples, a collection of myths, that can capture the child's imagination. From this the child may learn the necessary skills to understand and criticize contemporary society, but there is nothing in the *content* of these stories that seems to have any bearing on the present, for all that they are "posited" as a foundation of world culture. In other words, Gramsci's defense of classical education shares the assumption of its detractors that knowledge of antiquity in and of itself is essentially irrelevant to understanding the present.

It was not simply that modern knowledge had gone beyond ancient; modern knowledge was relevant to the understanding of modern society in a way that classical learning could never be because modern society was radically different from that of any preceding period. Gramsci suggests that "in modern civilization all practical activities have become so complex and the sciences so intertwined with life that each activity tends to create a school for its own specialists."⁷ This tendency to specialization is offered as an explanation for the decline of classics, but it could equally well serve as a justification for it; the nature of the modern world, and above all its complexity, is such that only modern knowledge is appropriate or adequate for its understanding. Classical learning speaks of and to a simpler world, which could be adequately comprehended as a whole by an individual without the need for the fragmentation of knowledge into diverse specialisms; antiquity itself was such a world, and so too were the medieval and Renaissance societies that had looked to the classics for answers. Under the conditions of the present, such worlds must seem either mythical or dead, absolutely separate from modernity.

From the nineteenth century onwards, the term "modern" became a marker no longer just of chronology, denoting a straightforward contrast with "ancient" or "medieval," but of quality, evaluated in almost invariably positive terms.⁸ From this perspective, the science of the seventeenth century, the philosophy of the eighteenth, and the economy of the nineteenth could all be claimed as recognizably "modern" knowledge, in contrast to what had gone before. Further, there was a prevalent belief that all parts of "modern society" share in and reflect this quality of modernity; even if "modernity" is understood as primarily an economic phenomenon,

for example, its effects are assumed to permeate the rest of society, culture, and individual behavior. The contrast between “modern” and “pre-modern” takes on greater significance than the more straightforward contrast between “present” and “past”; the more recent past could be seen as part of “our age,” as modern or proto-modern, while earlier periods were regarded as entirely “other.” The contrast had a spatial dimension as well; modernity was located primarily in Europe and the New World, while Africa and Asia were associated with the pre-modern past. Inevitably, then, there was a growing sense that pre-modern societies could have little direct relevance to the present. As Reinhart Koselleck expressed it in his study of the decline of the notion of *historia magistra vitae* (history, the teacher of life), in the course of the nineteenth century the gap between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” grew ever larger.⁹ Belief in the exemplarity of the past, in its usefulness as a guide to future action, depended on the assumption that past and present occupied a continuous space of potential experience, founded on the supposed constancy of human nature, human behavior, and their social and physical context. This assumption was increasingly felt to be untenable. Koselleck emphasizes the importance for this development of the French Revolution, which was experienced as the start of a future that had never before existed – a new politics, a new society, a new type of individual – but one could equally well point to the more gradual impact of economic and technological change, which transformed not only social and economic structures, but nature itself. Such was the pace of change that even individual experience might be seen as an inadequate means of understanding the present or predicting the future; the wisdom of one generation could be rejected as irrelevant to the problems faced by the next. The accumulated experience of classical antiquity, addressing a simpler world that had wholly ceased to exist, could scarcely have anything to contribute to the desperate struggle to make sense of an unpredictable, infinitely complex modernity.

This perspective did not do away altogether with the idea that knowledge of the past in general and of classical antiquity in particular might still be relevant and important, but it changed the basis on which the classics might claim attention. Its domain shrank. It had next to nothing to contribute to the development of modern science and technology, and increasingly the “human sciences” like economics and sociology argued that evidence drawn from modern society itself was a more reliable basis for understanding, without any need to consider material from a society constituted on quite different principles. In history and philosophy,

antiquity could maintain its place, and it continued to claim validity in the fields of art and culture – largely by detaching ancient cultural products from their original context and elevating them to the status of timeless classics, relevant to and open to appropriation by modernity. Even here, however, the position of antiquity was not unassailable. It was confronted not only by the complaints of modern artists against the normative status of the classics but also by the sense that much of ancient literature was scarcely worthy of “classic” status – as Goldhill suggests of Plutarch, it was incapable of performing its intended function in an alien setting, and could only be found boring by a modern reader without the scholarly expertise and inclination to consider it in its original context.¹⁰ Both the emphasis – exemplified by Gramsci’s discussion – on ancient literature and history as an inert body of material upon which a student can practice techniques of analysis that will later be turned to more practical uses in the “real” world, and the turn to studies of the reception of antiquity – insisting on its ongoing contribution to the development of modern culture – can be seen as the classicists’ response to an ever-present threat of redundancy and irrelevance in the modern world.¹¹

The Modernity of Antiquity

The later period of antiquity was in essence entirely modern.

E. Meyer *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichtstheorie und zur wirtschaftliche und politischen Geschichte des Altertums*, 89

The belief that we are now living within modernity affected not only the status of the study of classical antiquity but also the ways in which classical antiquity itself was understood; it provoked new questions and debates about the nature of ancient society as well as how it should be analyzed. On the one hand, it became natural for many historians to see antiquity as “pre-modern,” largely or entirely different and separate from the present. Such a society needed to be understood in its own terms, and historians therefore needed to map out the nature and significance of the ways that it differed from more recent and more familiar societies. They might look for new tools of analysis for this purpose – comparative evidence from other pre-modern or pre-industrial societies, for example – or at any rate, firmly reject the employment of theories, like economics, that had been created to understand the modern world. Above all,

historians could now see in sharp relief the way that earlier generations had unconsciously created an antiquity in their own image, assuming it to be similar to their own society rather than realizing how far it was entirely “other.” On the other hand, in so far as “modernity” could be seen as a quality rather than an exclusively temporal label, and because the differences between classical antiquity and other pre-modern societies seemed to be at least as significant as the differences between antiquity and the present, it was entirely possible for some historians to see classical civilization as being in some sense “modern,” an earlier occurrence of the same phenomenon that was now being experienced in the present.

The obvious example of this dialectic is found in ancient economic history, an approach to understanding the past that was of course itself entirely modern, inconceivable before the mid-eighteenth century. Ancient historians were in fact slow to respond to the challenge and opportunities presented by the new science of political economy, despite the close relationship of writers like Edward Gibbon and George Grote to some of the pioneering economic thinkers.¹² When they did turn their attention to the economic and social aspects of Greek and Roman history, rather than focusing solely on the political and military, their arguments rapidly fell into the two positions that have dominated the subject ever since. Generally labeled as “primitivism” and “modernizing,” these approaches focus entirely on the question of whether or not the ancient economy can be characterized as “modern,” and whether the differences between ancient and modern should be seen as merely quantitative rather than qualitative.¹³

To a historian like M. I. Rostovtzeff, classical antiquity appeared, in important respects, to resemble the early modern period.¹⁴ Clearly it could not match the scale of productive activity or international commerce of the present, but it was undoubtedly a world of widespread and sophisticated trade, thriving cities, innovations in agricultural production and the legal framework that supported economic transactions, a high level of monetization, and above all, a rich and complex material culture enjoyed not only by the wealthy elite but by the mass of the population. The cities of Hellenistic Greece and the Roman Empire were made glorious by the benefactions of a new class, whose wealth came from trade and manufacturing rather than traditional land-holding. All of this echoed the conditions that had nurtured the rise of capitalism in the late medieval and early modern periods, and foreshadowed subsequent developments.

The creation of a uniform world-wide civilization and of similar social and economic conditions is now going on before our eyes over the whole expanse of the civilized world. This process is complicated, and it is often difficult to clear up our minds about it. We ought therefore to keep in view that the ancient world also lived, for a series of centuries, a life which was uniform in culture and politics, in social and economic conditions. The modern development, in this sense, differs from the ancient only in quantity and not in quality.¹⁵

In contrast, a “primitivist” historian like M. I. Finley can seem to offer less a positive characterization of the ancient economy than a fervent reiteration of what it was *not* – namely, that it was not modern.¹⁶ The scale of productive activity and trade is played down, with scepticism about the value of the archaeological evidence which Rostovtzeff valued so highly; it is emphasized that such activity was only a thin veneer on the surface of the agrarian subsistence economy in which the vast majority of the ancient population was engaged, and that the activity was inspired by quite different motivations from modern capitalism – the satisfaction of needs and the pursuit of status, not the relentless drive for unlimited profit. Ancient cities were dominated by the old land-owning elite and founded on consumption rather than production; there is no trace of any alternative set of values to the traditional disparagement of trade and industry as incompatible with honor and culture. Antiquity was not and could never have been the birthplace of modernity or capitalism, and it certainly was not modern. Further, this conclusion had important methodological implications; whereas Rostovtzeff was happy to use terms such as “bourgeoisie” to describe the urban elites of the Greek East, for Finley this, like any attempt at interpreting antiquity through the categories of modern economics, was an entirely illegitimate “modernizing” of the pre-modern past.

A number of different factors underlie and determine the parameters of this debate; one reason, perhaps, why it has proved to be so long-lived, despite the growing frustration of historians with its limitations. Partly, it reflects preferences for different sorts of evidence: the material record with its remnants of tens of thousands of amphorae and hundreds of shipwrecks versus the literary evidence that expressed the entirely non-modern world view of the ancient landowning elite. Partly, one might suggest, it reflects differences in temperament and in attitudes (emotional and political) towards modernity; Rostovtzeff’s approach to antiquity is overwhelmingly optimistic in his evaluation of its level of development,

in contrast to his pessimistic view of the likely fate of European civilization, whereas Finley takes a minimalist and almost cynical view of the potential significance of every piece of evidence, and is constantly struck by differences where Rostovtzeff sees similarities and analogies. Their accounts rest also on different interpretations of the dynamic of human history on the global scale; whereas Rostovtzeff believes in the possibility of recurrence, a perspective that resembles the view of history as the birth, maturity, and decadence of successive civilizations popularized by writers like Oswald Spengler, Finley's narrative is a linear one focused around a single abrupt change in continuity between the stagnant pre-modern and the dynamic modern.

Above all, however, these two versions rest on quite different conceptions of the nature of modernity. Rostovtzeff's approach might be labelled "phenomenological"; modernity is understood in terms of a set of distinctive features, such as trade, flourishing cities, productive activity, and so forth. The past can be labeled as "modern" when it exhibits similar features, and in these terms classical antiquity, above all the Roman Empire, seems to have a strong claim to the title. The alternative approach, that taken by Finley, is to insist that modernity should be understood as a coherent, interconnected system; its characteristic features of trade, flourishing cities, and so forth are not accidental but closely connected to and dependent on one another, determined by a single underlying principle. Modernity is not, as it seems to be for Rostovtzeff, a collection of powerful but disconnected images and conceptions of "the modern," but a unified, unique development. The surface resemblance between antiquity and the early modern period is irrelevant if their underlying principles of organization were different, as Finley argues that they were. The same logic applies to the use of "modern" terminology in characterizing the ancient world; whereas Rostovtzeff wants to use "bourgeoisie" as a general term of social analysis applicable to any social system, Finley and the primitivists insist that its range of reference is limited to early modern proto-capitalist and modern capitalist society. Use of the term in an ancient context implies not that some characteristics of both the ancient and the modern social group are comparable, but that all of them are, and that in turn implies that antiquity was a modern capitalist society.

The intention of this discussion is not so much to suggest that the modernizing position is less wrong than the "primitivists" have maintained, as to argue that it is problematic for different reasons than they suggest,

and that the primitivist position is equally misleading for very similar reasons. The archaeologist Andrea Carandini argued twenty years ago that “‘modernism’ and ‘primitivism’ are two sides to the same coin, the self-deification of the present and the annihilation of the past.”¹⁷ That seems to imply that the comparison between past and present, whether implicit or explicit, positive or negative, may be the problem; scarcely a tenable position when most theories of historical knowledge would insist on the impossibility of understanding the past except through knowledge and experience of the present. The problem is rather that of the idea of “modernity” itself. The modernizers and primitivists tend to talk past one another because they have entirely different ideas of what modernity is and how it could be identified; however, neither side recognizes this as an issue, either in their own work or in that of their opponents. Each takes “modernity” as something that is straightforward and known, an empirical object with which antiquity can be compared and contrasted and against which its performance can be measured. This assumption is by no means confined to ancient economic history, though it is more visible there; it pervades all discussions of antiquity, including the new discipline of “reception studies.” Accounts of the changing meanings and interpretations of classical texts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all too often consider them in the “context” of a simplistic and under-analyzed notion of modernity, whose existence and nature is taken for granted. A clear example is found in Goldhill’s assertion, in an otherwise highly sophisticated and self-aware analysis of the changing meanings and significance of knowledge of Greek since the Renaissance, that “a modern reader” must find Plutarch boring.¹⁸ It is true enough that Plutarch’s popularity has declined rapidly, especially since 1850, but attributing this simply to “modernity” seems insufficient, given the lack of any agreement as to what “modernity” might be.

The Problem of Modernity

The problems created by the existence of different approaches to understanding modernity are not confined to ancient history. Throughout the human sciences there is no consensus, no single agreed definition or theory, and yet it is taken for granted not only that modernity exists but that it has been the defining condition of existence since, at the very least, the beginning of the nineteenth century. Understanding of what it

means to be modern (and hence by implication not-modern) has varied from discipline to discipline, from century to century, and from country to country. Rather than different theories addressing the same object, in the case of “modernity” the different theories work to create the object of their analysis, and are thus largely or wholly incomparable with one another.

The tensions evident in the debate on the “modernity” of the ancient economy are replicated in attempts at getting to grips with modernity itself. Is it to be seen as a unique, temporally located phenomenon, a particular stage in a linear process of historical development, or a quality that is most easily identified in the present but could be found elsewhere? The sociologist Anthony Giddens opens his study of the theme from the former perspective:

“Modernity” refers to modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence. This associates modernity with a time period and with an initial geographical location, but for the moment leaves its major characteristics safely stowed away in a black box.¹⁹

However, this approach involves all the usual risks of periodization: it rests on the assumption, common to many accounts of modernity, that the temporal juxtaposition of different social structures, institutions, and practices automatically implies their coherence and interconnection, while the question of how to define the chronological limits of the phenomenon rests on an already-existing idea of what is to be bounded.²⁰ Essentially, Giddens’ argument seeks to start from the fact that there is general agreement both that we live within modernity and about its major elements, and then aims to develop a more nuanced account of the phenomenon. This begs questions not only about the Eurocentric implications of the account, as Goody has argued, since the individual elements that are often considered distinctively modern can be paralleled in other societies, but also about the status of “modernity” as a taken-for-granted object of analysis.²¹

The “phenomenological” approach to modernity, identifying it in terms of the characteristics which are generally associated with “modern” society, is common enough; Agnes Heller defines it in terms of two “constituents” and three “logics,” while Giddens identifies four “frameworks of experience.”²²

Each of these approaches is fascinating and persuasive in its own terms, but it is striking how varied the lists of the “characteristic” features of modernity can be. The pervasive sense that we are living in modernity means that virtually any aspect of contemporary existence can be regarded as symptomatic of this, and further assumed to be somehow connected with every other aspect. Different disciplines make their own selections from the list of potentially defining characteristics; “modernity” defined in economic terms, therefore, overlaps only slightly with the modernity studied by social theory, and different interpretative traditions within those disciplines are equally inclined to privilege different aspects of “modern life” in constituting their object of analysis.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the attempts at discerning the underlying logic of modernity, the force or forces that are assumed to explain and unify what is otherwise experienced as complex, chaotic, and incoherent, have reached such different conclusions. Such theories argue simultaneously for the validity of their methods and assumptions on the grounds of their success in producing an interpretation of modernity that chimes with lived experience and for the validity of their interpretations of the present on the basis of the claims to authority of their chosen approach. Is modernity to be located in the structures of economic production and their role in determining the material conditions of life, or in the lived experience of social individuals – themes such as alienation, fragmentation, depersonalization, *anomie* – or in a characteristic psychology? The result of such debates is often an image or a metaphor, powerful and persuasive but unfalsifiable and incomparable with other such images, as Giddens compares the “iron cage” of Max Weber and the “devouring monster” of Karl Marx and then proposes his own interpretation of modernity as juggernaut, “a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of control and which can rend itself asunder.”²³

For social science, of course, the development of these multiple interpretations of modernity can be taken as an interesting question in itself. The real problems arise whenever social scientists, or anyone else, seek to draw on the concept of modernity as a basis for interpretation and explanation, a means of understanding a particular aspect of “modern society” – if only in order to explain the way that an ancient text was read in a new context. Since modernity is understood, and indeed experienced, as a unified phenomenon, theories of its nature and underlying laws of motion make powerful claims about their potential to explain all

aspects of modern life. If modernity is ultimately defined and constituted by, say, the progressive rationalization of society or the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat, then this insight can illuminate everything from drug-taking and urban violence to the development of the English novel. But that is a large “if”; there are always plenty of other interpretations of modernity available, “as many versions as there are thinkers or journalists.”²⁴ The question must always be: Which modernity? Whose theory of it?

“Modernity” is protean; it changes shape according to whether it is viewed as a historical phenomenon or as a quality, and according to whether it is seen from an economic, a social or a psychological perspective, through the theories of Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Freud, or many others. Our lives, experiences, and even emotions are felt to be determined by the fact that we live in modern times; but it is equally possible to argue, with Bruno Latour, that we have never actually been modern.²⁵ Modernity can be seen as a mythology, a set of stories that are called upon to give legitimacy to institutions or actions and to give meaning to our lives and experiences. As Nietzsche argued, the fact that a mythology is not actually true, and that it can be shown to be entirely self-serving and simply a reflection of our own desires, does not thereby lessen its importance or effectiveness.²⁶ The defining, unifying feature of modernity, one might argue, is the conviction of its own existence and significance; the sense, of those who believe themselves to be modern and to live in modern times, that this explains the whole of their condition of existence, including their dissatisfaction with the world and with themselves. If modernity is “only” an idea, it has proved an astonishingly powerful and influential one.

Future, Present, Past

It is possible to identify a unifying theme within the many various theories of modernity, besides their conviction that they are engaged with a real, knowable object: a particular relation to time and history. This is often suggested as one of the defining characteristics of the experience of modernity itself: it is characterized by unceasing change and transformation – “all that is solid evaporates,” as Marx put it – in contrast to the unchanging past, or by the regulation of time through the widespread use of the clock, a view which can be dated at least as far back as Oswald Spengler’s denunciation of the Germans for inventing this “spine-chilling symbol of

time ticking away.”²⁷ The archetypal modern attitude is a sense of separation from the past, based on the unique qualities of “newness” possessed by the present; the abandonment of the historical perspective in the social sciences can be seen as the working through of Hegel’s forthright statement:

One refers rulers, statesmen and peoples to the lessons of the experience of history. However, what experience and history teach is this, that peoples and governments have never learnt anything from history, nor have they ever acted in accordance with the lessons which could be drawn from it. Each period has such peculiar circumstances and is such an individual situation that decisions must be made and can only be made on the basis of the period itself. In the crowd of world events a general principle is no help, nor is the recollection of similar conditions, because something like a pale memory has no strength against the liveliness and freedom of the present. From this perspective nothing is more insipid than the often-repeated appeal to Greek and Roman examples, as happened so frequently in the revolutionary period in France.²⁸

Not only does the horizon of expectation, in Koselleck’s terms, move ever further away from the space of experience, but distinctions are drawn even within the latter; the bulk of past events seems ever more separate from and irrelevant to our own experiences and expectations, but we may retain some connection with those societies that are past but still recognized as “modern.” Ancient examples, however, have nothing to contribute to understanding the present, since that world was so radically different; whereas once men looked anxiously to the past for guidance, now modernity is moving towards its own self-understanding as the basis for complete self-reliance.

Are we not entitled to assume that the achievements of modern times, our illumination and the progress of all arts and sciences, have worn out the Greek and Roman garments of their childhood and outgrown their leading-strings, so that they can now advance on their own territory without hindrance?²⁹

The philosopher, as he glances now to the past, now to the future, will perceive more and more striking differences between the social condition of our ancestors and that of our descendents . . . Hitherto men have walked backwards on the path of civilization, turning their backs on the future; they have usually had their gaze fixed on the past and they have glanced only very seldom and cursorily at the future.³⁰

However bold such statements appear, and however detrimental to the status of the historical disciplines, this attitude did not in fact amount to a complete abandonment of the past. On the contrary, it established a new, and if anything more intimate, relationship with it, to the extent that modernity can be said to have no identity which does not depend on a relation to the past, understood now not as a source of examples and precepts but as the “other,” which allowed modernity to define its own contours.

If in one’s own history it was possible to register new experiences, those which supposedly no one had ever before had, it was also possible to conceive the past as something that was fundamentally “other.” This in turn led to the fact that it was precisely along the plane of progress that the specificity of the epoch had to be expressed. Hence, diagnosis of the *neue Zeit* and analysis of the past eras corresponded to each other.³¹

In the first place, the past was required as a means of measuring change, of establishing the degree to which modernity was indeed an entirely new form of society. The sense that modernity is characterized by an unprecedented degree of upheaval and constant transformation rests on an implicit image of past timelessness and stability; modernity is defined both by its own internal changeability and by the change from an unchanging past. Giddens’ comment, for example, that “we get only limited assistance from our knowledge of prior periods of transition” because of the unprecedented degree of transformation in modernity, is slightly undercut by the temporal references inherent in statements like “in both their extensionality and their intensionality the transformations involved in modernity are more profound than most sorts of change characteristic of prior periods.”³² The past continues to be required as a point of reference, to calculate the speed of change and the distance covered from the point of origin – the more distant the past appears, the greater modernity’s success.

Second, the past thereby becomes a means of understanding change, precisely through understanding the nature of the differences between past and present. Exemplarity is abandoned; the past matters because it is different and thus represents a means of discerning the essential characteristics of modernity and the process of its development. This was explicitly recognized by many of the pioneering theorists of modernity, who did not share the view that the past had nothing to teach the present about itself.

The observation of the present state of civilization, considered by itself, can no more determine the actual tendencies of society, than the study of any other isolated epoch can do . . . The chronological order of historical epochs is not their philosophical order. In place of saying; the past, the present and the future, we should say the past, the future and the present. In truth it is only when we have conceived the future by the aid of the past that we can with advantage revert to the present so as to seize its true character.³³

The observer's eye may acquire a singular acuteness by the comparative study of as many nations as possible, especially of those which have already passed away. [If anyone could] contemplate the history of mankind as a whole, of which the histories of individual nations are but the parts, the successive steps in the evolution of humanity, would of course afford him a similar objective rule for all those points in which whole peoples permanently differ from one another.³⁴

Finally, the past offered a means of developing a critique of modernity, by providing a measure against which change might be not only measured but evaluated. It represented, potentially, an alternative to the present – if not one that could ever realistically be revived, then at any rate a basis for imagining future possibilities. The problem for most critics of modernity, as Habermas notes of Hegel's interpretation, is that the present seen as the outcome of natural processes of change cannot be criticized or evaluated on any terms other than its own, and so offers no grounds for imagining alternatives to it.³⁵ Comparison and contrast with the past, however, might offer a basis for questioning whether the process was indeed natural and inevitable, or whether, on the contrary, it was a perversion of the true destiny of humanity. The contrast may reveal what has been lost as well as gained in the process, and so allow modernity to be held to account for its failure to live up to its promises. Above all, the past shows that things were once different; logically, then, the present state of affairs cannot be assumed to be an eternal condition, and there are grounds for hope, for those dissatisfied with the consequences of modernity, that the future might be different in turn.

In the classical period of the theorizing of modernity, the past most often called upon for these purposes was the world of Greece and Rome, especially the former. In part this undoubtedly reflects the contingent fact that classics dominated the education of most thinkers in the nineteenth

century and, in Germany at least, well into the twentieth.³⁶ It was entirely natural for them to have recourse to classical examples and to think of issues to some extent in the terms in which they were discussed by the ancient authors, with whom they were so familiar. More recent writers on the subject are likely to operate with a less specific idea of “pre-modern societies” or “agrarian civilizations” as the basis for the contrast with modernity; even so, references to classical authors, especially philosophers, persist to a significant degree, and the classical world continues to provide images and concepts, like the term “agora,” as a means of characterizing a particular relationship between the public and private spheres.³⁷ Classical antiquity might make for a particularly good example not only because of its familiarity – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was by far the best known pre-modern society – but because of its nature. It was, one might suggest, conceived to be sufficiently similar to the present for the comparison to yield precise and nuanced knowledge; unlike the crude contrast between, say, modern Europe and nineteenth-century Africa, comparison of the sophisticated yet clearly different society and economy of classical antiquity with that of modernity would throw the particular characteristics of the latter into sharp relief. At any rate this seems to have been the prevalent assumption, fuelled by the racism that regarded the ancient Mediterranean as the place of origin of European civilization and other cultures as wholly, rather than partially, primitive and “other.”

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussions of the nature of modernity, whether understood in economic, social, or cultural terms, constantly refer to classical examples, texts, and ideas; the modern idea of modernity is inconceivable without the background of antiquity. The obvious problem with such approaches, of course, is that they almost invariably assume the existence of a knowable and largely known antiquity that can serve as a counterpoint to a nebulous, still-to-be-defined modernity, and bring its outline into clarity. This was quite as much an illusion as the belief of classicists and ancient historians in a stable, clearly defined modernity, against which they could measure and evaluate the ancient world. Ideas of “antiquity” shifted and were constantly renegotiated, in response to new evidence, new preferences, and new knowledge – as the new sciences of modernity in turn influenced the way that antiquity was interpreted. The concepts of “antiquity” and “modernity” are equally implicated in one another, equally ambiguous and mobile.

Untimely Knowledge

For Nietzsche, knowledge about antiquity is important because it is “untimely,” able to illuminate the present through comparison and contrast. It is worth noting that he was one of the few writers also to reverse the process; to recognize that “antiquity” was as unstable a concept as “modernity,” with each informing and influencing the other, and to see this interdependence as both an opportunity and a threat. In the confrontation with modernity, the right idea of antiquity could be liberating; the wrong one might be fatal.

This book aims to consider the way that, in the “long nineteenth century,” ideas of modernity were developed and explored through the consideration of the use of the classical past and the definition of differences, contrasts, and continuities. It does not attempt to offer a complete account of the idea of modernity, a truly gigantic task, or even a complete account of the role of antiquity in the development of that idea, but rather seeks to highlight relevant themes in a selection of the most important writers on the subject. Such a project invariably involves a number of risks; that of neglecting writers and texts whom others might think deserve a far more prominent place in the account; that of misinterpreting their ideas through too-brief treatment and by shoe-horning their views into debates in which they never intended to participate; and that of exaggerating the importance of the past, and the classical past in particular, in the development of these intellectual traditions. I have wondered on several occasions whether the importance of antiquity for the concept of modernity has genuinely been missed, or whether I tend to perceive it because of my own background and intellectual inclinations. I take heart from the fact that it is identified, and discussed from a different perspective, in at least some of the works which have inspired this book.

Historical epochs, such as modernity or classical antiquity, are constructs that we design in order to highlight, through historical comparison, distinctive elements of any set of practices or institutions. With the “fetishism of modernities” these conceptual constraints come back to haunt us as the real-world obstacles to our goals.³⁸

The next three chapters consider three different, though frequently interconnected, ways in which the example of antiquity was felt to illuminate

the special qualities of modernity, whether positively or negatively: in the organization of production and economic life; in the nature of social relationships and organization and of the human individual; and in the development of culture and its functions within society. The fifth chapter will consider the development of attitudes to history as a whole, both the attempts at discerning the overall logic of its development and the suspicion that the historical sense itself might represent a distinctively modern problem or a problem for modernity. The final chapter will look at some of the issues involved in the deployment of antiquity in discussions of modernity, not just as the basis for substantive social analysis but as a rhetorical strategy, focusing on the key example of the way that ancient slavery was discussed and represented.

Can the past illuminate the present or predict the future? Since our understanding of the past derives from our knowledge and experience of the present, to the extent that, in Nietzsche's view, it is no more than the projection and externalization of our own desires, this seems doubtful; and yet, insofar as any sense has been made of "modernity," it has been through the confrontation and mutual interrogation of those two mythological constructs, antiquity and modernity. Nietzsche's critique of contemporary philology and its distortion of both past and present, like Marx's analysis of the way that the past could be employed to defend the present and destroy the future, did not lead either of them to abandon consideration of classical antiquity. What mattered, and matters, is how and why antiquity is considered. "For I do not know what meaning classical studies would have in our time if not that of working in their untimeliness – that is to say, against our time and thereby on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come."³⁹

Notes

- 1 Davidson (1977); Entwistle (1979).
- 2 *Prison Notebooks*, IV, §49.
- 3 *Ibid.*, §55.
- 4 Goldhill (2002).
- 5 Cf. Rosen (1989).
- 6 Marchand (1996), 341–75; Stray (1998).
- 7 *Prison Notebooks*, IV, §49.
- 8 Williams (1983), 208–9.

- 9 Koselleck (2004), 26–42, 255–75.
- 10 Goldhill (2002), 292.
- 11 Cf. Martindale (2006).
- 12 Morley (1998).
- 13 Morley (2004a), 33–50.
- 14 On Rostovtzeff, see Shaw (1992).
- 15 Rostovtzeff (1926), 10.
- 16 See above all Finley (1985).
- 17 Carandini (1983), 202.
- 18 Goldhill (2002), 292.
- 19 Giddens (1990), 1.
- 20 Cf. Goody (2004), 6–15.
- 21 Goody (2004), 6.
- 22 Heller (1999); Giddens (1990), 137–44. Cf. also Hall, Held, Hubert, and Thompson (1995).
- 23 Giddens (1990), 144.
- 24 Latour (1993), 10.
- 25 Latour (1993).
- 26 *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*.
- 27 *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, 19, and cf. 10–11 on differences between modern and ancient experiences of time. Giddens (1990), 17–21; Harvey (1989), 10–38.
- 28 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, 17.
- 29 Hegel, “On classical studies,” 324.
- 30 Saint-Simon, “Social organisation,” 221–2.
- 31 Koselleck (2004), 240.
- 32 Giddens (1990), 4–5.
- 33 Comte, “Plan of the scientific operations,” 151–2.
- 34 Roscher, *Principles of Political Economy*, 114–15.
- 35 Habermas (1987), 16–22.
- 36 See e.g. McCarthy (1994), (2003).
- 37 Bauman (2000), 39.
- 38 Yack (1992), xiv.
- 39 Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*, 247.