

Mill and Modernity

“Modernity” is often seen to divide along lines that first emerged in the nineteenth century. Driven by the instrumentalities of capitalism and technocracy, the Enlightenment dream of freedom became an ideological cover for domination within and beyond the borders of Western nation-states. As against the *bourgeois modernity* that produced Weberian disenchantment and the imperial “civilizing mission,” *aesthetic modernity* offered the quasi-utopian project of radicalizing self-invention, beginning with Baudelaire and Nietzsche and continuing with Foucault’s ethics of the self.

In *A Singular Modernity* (2002), Fredric Jameson writes from the vantage of Marxist aestheticism to deride the recent poststructuralist tendency to celebrate cultural difference, disarticulated from material conditions. Whereas the idea of modernity as an unfinished project maintains a focus on large-scale political transformation, the postmodern enthusiasm for “alternative modernities” turns left intellectuals into the unwitting ideologues of neoliberalism.

In this paper I argue that both sides in this debate between singular and plural conceptions of modernity are hobbled by their acceptance of the split between bourgeois and aesthetic modernity. The result is that both either ignore or dismiss John Stuart Mill’s complex analyses of the modern condition. Though it is often taken to exemplify his support for an imperialistic view of non-Western backwardness, Mill’s “Civilization” is a powerful critique of the contradictory tendencies within modernity. Here and elsewhere Mill offers not one but two distinct modern temporalities. If civilization has, on the one hand, witnessed linear advances in *material* culture, on the other, it has as yet failed to achieve the more complex improvements in *human* culture to which it aspires. Rather, in the sense in which civilization stands for material advance, civilization’s development has resulted in a failure to progress. These goals reappear in Mill’s later efforts to reconcile the normative foundations of a humanistic utilitarian ethics with the diversity and tolerance required to enable such feats of character building. Although Mill’s thought does not in itself crack the nut of reconciling universalistic goals with cultural difference, it provides many helpful resources. That said, the Mill of this reading is neither the pluralist of John Gray or Isaiah Berlin, or the romantic variously upheld by Charles Taylor and Anthony Appiah, among others.

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