- an analysis and discussion by James Arvanitakis, PhD

Anthony Giddens, I believe, is one of the most important figures in contemporary sociology and cultural studies. In his small volume, *Consequences of Modernity* (published 1991) he presents us with important insights into contemporary society.

This is an important book because Giddens presents us with a view of our contemporary society in all its complexity – from what believe that we are seeing a decline in trust of the very structures that are at the foundations of our society, but also what the results of this are. In so doing, Giddens forces us to reflect on both the structures that exist and also the relationships that form around them – arguing, when one changes, so do the rest. In this way, we are encouraged to reflect on the way we are in the world – what we think and feel – and how we fit in it.

This is a major theoretical statement, and I believe even 20 years on, Giddens offers a new and provocative interpretation of institutional transformations associated with the many changes that we define as ‘modernity’.

Modernity is a word we often throw around without thinking about it – it is a simple word that refers to the many complex changes in social life or societal organisation that emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards. These influences, for better and for worse, are now worldwide in their influence.

I wrote this summary and analysis of Gidden’s book because, I believe, he has developed a fresh understanding of the nature of modernity – which I believe is still relevant. This is because he develops on themes such as security, danger, trust and risk: all aspects that I believe remain under-studied. Giddens reminds us that modernity is a double-edged phenomenon: creating great opportunities for us to enjoy but it also has a dark side: from degrading nature to the development of military that continues to threaten our existence.

What follows is a summary of the first chapter of Gidden’s book – I hope you enjoy it and it helps you with your own research As always, feedback is welcome.

*James Arvanitakis, 2010*
Chapter 1: Introduction

This book is about an institutional analysis of modernity with cultural and epistemological (theory of method or how we gain and learn knowledge) overtones. Modernity refers to modes of social life and organisation that emerged in Europe from about the 17th century onwards and subsequently have became worldwide (more or less) in their influence.

Today, some argue that we stand in a new era that is taking us beyond modernity: post-modernity – but Giddens remains unconvinced. Much of the discussion here centres on institutional transformations, whereby we are moving from a system based on the manufacture of material goods to one concerned centrally with information. More common however, these controversies are focussed largely upon issues of philosophy and epistemology (again, the way we take knowledge in.)

Post-modernity, which has been attributed to Jean-Francois Lyotard, is a condition distinguished by the evaporating of the ‘grand narrative’ (which are the over-reaching story lines by means of which we have placed history). The post-modern outlook sees a plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge. Here, science does not play a privileged part. It is a shift away from attempts to ground one epistemology as well as a shift away from faith in human engineered progress.

A standard response, such as that presented by Jurgen Habermas (1987), is to demonstrate that a coherent epistemology is possible. But Giddens wants to take a different track: stating that this push by the post-modernists exists because we are caught up in things we neither understand nor can control.

To explain how this has come about, we need to go beyond inventing new words (such as post-modernity), and instead look at the nature of modernity itself that, Giddens argues, is poorly grasped. Rather than entering a phase of post-modernity, we are moving into one whereby the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised.

He believes that beyond modernity, there are contours of a new and different order, which is post-modern: which he distinguishes from post-modernity.
The origin of Giddens' interpretation is a ‘discontinuist’ interpretation of modern social development: that is, modern social institutions are unique – and therefore different from the traditional. To understand this we need to review what modernity is.

**The discontinuities of modernity**
The idea that human history is marked by certain ‘discontinuities’ and does not have a smooth developing form is not new: it is stressed in most versions of Marxism. Gidden’s focus is to accentuate and emphasise the discontinuity (or discontinuities) associated with the modern period.

Modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order in an unprecedented way. In both their extensionality (or the way we are expected to live in the world) and intentionality (or the things we want to achieve), the transformations involved in modernity are more profound than most sorts of change characteristics of prior periods.

On the extensional plane, we have social interconnection globally: That is, we now no longer are tied to our locality but spread all over the world. We have also seen changes on intentional terms – the way we have altered some of our intimate day-to-day existence.

Giddens then goes on to present us with a vary dense section of his work, stating that: While there are continuities between the traditional and the modern (and contrasts can be misleading), the changes of the past 400 years are so vast, that we get limited assistance from our knowledge of prior periods of transition in trying to interpret them. What I believe he is stating here is that the changes over the last 400 years are so incredible, it is different to attempt to understand any previous period – because it is something that we cannot really understand. So while parts of the pre-modern and modern period are continuous, most of it involves a massive leap – and we should be very careful in interpreting previous periods with our ‘modern’ eyes.

The long-standing influence of social evolutionism is one reason why the discontinuity-type character of modernity is not appreciated. We, therefore, need to displace or deconstruct any evolutionary narrative so we can analyse modernity and debate the post-modern.
History does not have a ‘totalised’ form attributed to it by evolutionary conceptions. Deconstructing social evolutionism means that we do not have to accept history as having a unity, or as reflecting certain unifying principles of organisation and transformation. Neither does it imply chaos, as there are definite episodes of historical transition.

There are several features that separate modern social institutions from the traditional social orders:

1. The sheer pace of change which the era of modernity sets in motion – most obvious in technology but pervades other spheres;
2. The scope of change, as different areas of the globe are drawn into interconnection with one another, waves of social transformation crash across the earth’s surface; and
3. The intrinsic nature of modern institutions: some modern forms are not found in prior historical periods (such as the state) or only have a specious continuity with pre-existing social orders (such as urban settlements which are only related by location but not order).

**Security and danger, trust and risk**

Modernity is a double-edged phenomenon: The development of modern social institutions and their worldwide spread has created opportunities but modernity also has a sombre side. It is this “opportunity side” that has been stressed by the founders of sociology: Giddens’ discusses how Marx and Durkheim saw the modern era as a troubled one, but the positive side outweighed its negative characteristics. While Max Weber, in contrast, was more pessimistic, he never grasped how extensive the darker side of modernity can turn out.

Giddens outlines a number of examples including: While industrial work was acknowledged as having degrading consequences, the impact on the environment was never predicted; The consolidation of political power into totalitarianism was never expected, as despotism seemed to be a characteristic of the pre-modern state (totalitarian rule connects political, military and ideological power in a more concentrated form than was possible before the emergence of the modern nation-state); and, the industrialisation of war was not given a great deal of attention by the
founding fathers of sociology (who could never has predicted the development of nuclear weaponry).

The world today is a fraught and dangerous one that has done more than just blunt the assumption that the emergence of modernity would lead to the formation of a happier and more secure social order. Giddens’ argues that there is more at stake than ‘history goes nowhere’, as we have now institutionalised this double-edged nature of modernity. To overcome this, we must look at the limitations of classical sociological perspectives that limit us.

**Sociology and modernity**

Giddens begins this section by noting that sociology is a broad topic and generalisations are questionable. There are, however, three widely held conceptions that inhibit satisfactory analysis of modern institutions:

1. Institutional diagnosis of modernity

   The most prominent traditions of sociology tend to look to a single overriding dynamic of transformation in interpreting the nature of modernity: for Marx it is capitalism. The restless nature of modernity is explained as an outcome of the investment-profit-investment cycle, which, combined with the tendency of the rate of profit to decline, brings about a constant disposition for the system to expand.

   Durkheim traced the nature of modern institutions primarily to the impact of industrialism. Durkheim did not see the changing order of modern social life derive essentially from capitalism; rather from the energising impulse of a complex division of labour, harnessing production to human needs through the industrial exploitation of nature. Durkheim argued we live not in a capitalist, but in an industrial order.

   Weber spoke of capitalism with a view closer to Durkheim. The focus is, however, ‘rationalisation’ as expressed in technology and in the organisation of human activities in the shape of bureaucracy. That is, Weber saw one of the main drivers of change throughout modernity as the emergence of rationalised bureaucracies that implemented a number of rational policies despite the consequences. Examples we can think of here is the implementation of a national language: while this makes rational sense for reasons of commerce and communication, we
also lose many different dialects – something that can have profound consequences on identity.

Giddens emphasises that all these are important and should not be seen as mutually exclusive characteristics: modernity is multidimensional on the level of institutions and each level specified here plays a part.

2. The prime focus of sociological analysis – ‘society’

The concept of society occupies a focal point in much sociological discourse and Giddens defines it as ‘a distinct system of social relations’ which features in a basic fashion in each of the dominant perspectives.

Traditional views state that sociology is the study of (modern) human societies. This is a problem because it is focussed around the nation-state – a type of social community that contrasts in a radical way with pre-modern states – a point that is never fully acknowledged.

For Giddens, the second concern is the theoretical interpretation presented by Talcott Parsons, who states that the pre-eminent role of sociology is to resolve the ‘problem of order’. For Parsons, it is a question of integration that holds the system together in the face of divisions of interest that would ‘set all against all’.

Giddens believes we should reformulate the question of order as a problem of how it comes about that social systems ‘bind’ time and space. The problem of order is one of ‘time-space distanciation’: that is, the condition under which time and space are organised so as to connect presence and absence. This should be conceptually distinguished from that of the ‘boundedness’ of social systems: that is, modern societies (nation states) in some respects have a clearly defined boundedness while still having connections that go beyond. In contrast, no pre-modern society was as bounded as modern nation-states.

The level of time-space distanciation is much greater now than ever before: but it is more than a simple expansion in the ability of social systems to span time and space. We must look at how modern institutions become ‘situated’ in time and space to identify some of the distinctive traits of modernity as a whole.
3. The connections between sociological knowledge and the characteristics of modernity to which knowledge refers

Often sociology is understood as generating knowledge about social life that can be used for prediction and control – though Giddens argues this is simplistic. Rather, the relation between sociology and its subject matter, which is the actions of human beings in conditions of modernity, must be understood in terms of the ‘double hermeneutic’ (or what Giddens calls interpretation).

Giddens then turns to discuss ‘the model of reflexivity’: that is, the way sociological knowledge spirals in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and that universe as an integral part of that process. That is, learning about the world shapes us in the world’s image. Sociological concepts and findings are constitutively involved in what modernity is: the concepts actually develop modernity.

Sociology, however, does not develop cumulative knowledge as the natural sciences often do. We have learnt that controlling knowledge is not possible.

To adequately grasp the nature of modernity, we must ask: what are the sources of the dynamic nature of modernity? Giddens believes that the dynamism of modernity derives from the separation of time and space and their recombination, the disembedding of social systems, and the reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations.

So what does this mean I hear you ask? Giddens is saying that we have broken down the relationships between time and space and put them back together in different ways. Think of this example: Melbourne to Sydney is a lot further away than Sydney to Parkes (which is less than half the distance). Now, because of air travel, we think of Melbourne as an hour away, whereas Parkes with mostly think of driving (which is four hours away). Even if you decided to fly, flights to Melbourne leave every 20 minutes or so – whereas there is only one or 2 flights to Parkes per day. The cost is also almost one-third of the price to Melbourne than Parkes.

We can also think about how much easier it is to get from Sydney to London compared to getting to the Solomon Islands that are only a quarter of the distance away.
For Giddens, this has profound affects on the way we see the world – and alters many of the relationships and structures around us.

**Modernity, time and space**

To understand intimate connections in the transformation of time and space, we must draw contrasts with the pre-modern world. All pre-modern cultures possessed modes of calculation of time, but this time was always linked with space – and was usually imprecise and variable. The time of day was referenced with other socio-spatial markers. Giddens describes the 'when' being connected with the where or other natural occurrences.

The diffusion of the clock was key in the separation of time from space: it expressed a uniform dimension of ‘empty’ time – allowing the precise designation of ‘zones’ of the day (such as the working day). Time was connected with space and place until the uniformity of time measurement by clock was matched by uniformity in the social organisation of time: everyone has a calendar. This all coincided with the expansion of modernity.

The 'emptying of time' is in large part the precondition for the 'emptying of space' – as it has causal priority and control over space. The development of ‘empty space’ may be understood in terms of the separation of space and place. Place was once best conceptualised by the means of the idea of a locale – the physical settings. In pre-modern times, societies, space and place largely coincided – the spatial dimensions of social life for the majority of the population dominated by presence of localised activities.

Modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between 'absent' others: locationally different from any given face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity, place becomes increasingly phantasmagorical – locales are penetrated and shaped by distant social influences.

What structures the locale is not just what is present on the scene – the visible form of the locale conceals the distanced relations that determine its nature. Further, the dislocation of space from place is not bound to the emergence of uniform modes of measurement (like in time).
The development of ‘empty space’ is linked to two sets of factors: The first are those allowing the representation of space without reference to a privileged locale that forms a distinct vantage point. Secondly, it is those that make possible the substitutability of different spatial units: that is, remoteness is no reason for disconnection – any disconnection occurs for different reasons.

The ‘discovery’ of ‘remote’ regions of the world by ‘Westerners’ was the necessary basis for both of these. Along with this came the development of maps – which, in perspective played little part in the representation of geographical position and form. Together this established space ‘independent’ of any particular place or region.

The separation of time and space should not be seen as an unilinear development for it provokes opposite characteristics. We see that time and space are recombined in relation to social activity such as in the development of a timetable.

Giddens then turns to summarise the case for why this separation between time and space is key to modernity:

- It is a prime condition for the process of disembedding (discussed below);
- It provides the mechanisms for distinctive features of modern life such as the rationalised organisation; and
- The radical historicity associated with modernity depends upon modes of insertion into time and space that were never available to previous civilisations.

**Disembedding**

The separation of time and space and their formation into standardised empty dimensions cut the connections between social activity and its embedding of contexts of presence. That is, social contexts now can now be free of specific places, local habits and practices.

It is here that we can understand ‘disembedding’: which means the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space. This concept captures the shifting alignments of time and space that are key to understand the social changes within modernity.
There are 2 types of disembedding mechanisms involved in the development of modern social institutions. The first are the creation of symbolic tokens. For example, political legitimacy and money: these can be understood as the media of interchange that can be passed around without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them at any particular juncture.

The second is the creation of expert systems. That is, systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments we live in today. Although we may only consult professionals like lawyers occasionally, the systems in which the knowledge of experts is integrated influence almost all aspects of what we do. Like symbolic tokens, expert systems provide a guarantee of expectations across ‘distanciated’ time-space.

These are considered disembedding mechanisms by Giddens because they remove social relations from the immediacies of context – creating a stretching of the social system.

Trust
All disembedding mechanisms depend on ‘trust’ – which Giddens argues is fundamental to the institutions of modernity. Trust here is vested in abstract capacities (or systems) rather than individuals. For example, when we use monetary tokens, we do so on the presumption that people will honour their value. We have faith in the architect system that designs building. For the system, it is a public confidence in the government or faith that the house I am sitting in will not collapse.

For the lay person, trust ensures we do not need mastery or initiation into expert systems This should not be oversimplified, however: do we trust nuclear scientists? Giddens’ argues there is a pragmatic element on experience, law and organisations.

Trust should be understood in relation to risk – which is a term that emerged in the modern period. Trust presupposes awareness of the circumstance of risk.
So how do we understand trust? According to Giddens:

• Trust is related to absence in time and in space: the prime requirement for trust is not lack of power but lack of full information;
• Trust is bound up with contingency: it carries the connotation of reliability in the face of contingent outcome (in both individuals and systems);
• Trust is not the same as faith in the reliability of a person or system for it is what derives from that faith. Trust is the link between faith and confidence;
• Trust rests upon faith in the correctness of principles of which we are ignorant – not upon the good intentions of others;
• Trust can be defined as the confidence in the reliability of a person or system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events, where that confidence expresses a faith in the probity or love of another, or the correctness of abstract principles;
• Trust exists in the conditions of modernity in the context that: a) the awareness that human activity is socially created; b) the transformative scope of human action; and, c) an alteration in the perception of determination and contingency;
• Trust risk are intertwined: with trust serving to reduce or minimise the dangers to which particular types of activity are subject;
• Trust is balanced with acceptable risk to provide security; and
• Trust has an opposite which is not mistrust – rather something darker: dread.

The reflexivity of modernity
Giddens begins his discussion about reflexivity with the point that inherent in the idea of modernity is a contrast with tradition. There is a fundamental sense in which reflexivity is a defining characteristic of all human action: this is because we all keep in touch with what we are doing as an element of doing it. Giddens calls this the ‘reflexive monitoring of action’.

Human action involves a consistent and never-to-be-relaxed monitoring of behaviour and its contexts – this is not reflexivity connected with modernity but a basis of it. In modernity, reflexivity is introduced into the very basis of system reproduction: a process has no real tie to the past unless it can be defended in a principled way in the light of incoming knowledge – it cannot be sanctioned because of tradition alone. The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in light of incoming information about those very practices: in the process, this alters their character.

This ‘wholesale’ reflexivity that includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself, is distinct in modernity. Only in this century do we realise how unsettling this is, as modernity saw reason replace tradition. This was to give us certainty – but promotes
a sense of uncertainty, as we never know whether any given element of knowledge will be revised through this reflexivity. Under conditions of modernity, knowledge does not exist in the ‘old’ sense, where to know is to be certain.

In the social sciences, we see all empirical-based knowledge open to re-interpretation (and ‘subversion’) because of the entry of social scientific discourse into all contexts of analysis. This, according to Giddens, is fundamental to the reflexivity of modernity as a whole.

For example, decisions about marriage, property, divorce and so on are all based on marriage statistics. As we collect the statistics to monitor behaviour, this reflexivity changes our behaviour. Giddens argues that sociology is the same as modernity is itself deeply and intrinsically sociological.

The thesis that the more knowledge we have about social life equals greater control over our fate is false. This is because, as we collect knowledge, we change our actions, and therefore our fate. The result is that the acquisition of knowledge fails the very rationality goals of the Enlightenment. Giddens emphasises this by making the following points:

- The appropriation of knowledge does not happen in a homogenous fashion – we have differential levels of power;
- While values change, this does not happen independently of innovations in cognitive orientation created by the shifting world. The result is that there are no rational sets of values;
- The impact of unintended consequences: no matter how much we know, any actions will always have unintended consequences; and
- The reflexivity of modern social life blocks off the possibility of limiting these unintended consequences: knowledge may be stable, but learning that knowledge makes it unstable.

**Modernity or post-modernity?**

In this section, Giddens defines post-modernity and reviews its claims – stating that it does not exist. Rather, Giddens argues, it is merely modernity coming to understand itself.
Giddens believes that the Enlightenment did not see replacement of the providential but reshaped it: from divine belief in god to such a similar belief in reason. Modernity is in the roots of the Enlightenment because reason states that truths are only true until further notice (in principle). Anything else is seen as dogma – which is separate from reason.

For Giddens, Nietzsche does not take us beyond modernity, he simply provides us with a fuller understanding of the reflexivity inherent in modernity. Modernity is unsettling because of the circularity of reason and the nature of this circularity is puzzling: we justify a commitment to reason because of reason itself.

Modernity has also seen the evolution of ‘historicity’: that is, the use of knowledge about the past as a means of breaking with it. The break of providential views of history are radically different from the core perspectives of the Enlightenment as they are a self-clarification of modern thought as the remnants of tradition and providential outlook are cleared away, We are not moving beyond modernity, but a living through its radicalisation.

The decline of the West is not an issue for modernity because it looks beyond one civilisation. This declining grip over the rest of the world is not a result of the diminishing impact of the institutions which first arose there, but a result of their global spread. For Giddens, this is a result of globalisation. He concludes that this explains why the radicalising of modernity is so unsettling and so significant.

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This is the end of Chapter 1 – more to follow

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