
THEME

NOTE

A century and a half ago, the French poet Baudelaire could equate modernism with revolution and the modernist artist with the revolutionary. “The transient, the fleeting, the contingent,” are the marks of modernity, he said, and those characteristics are to be celebrated: the crowds in the streets, mingling high life and low, the actors and audience in the play of modern life. The hero of the modern age was not the exceptional individual but the person in the street, shopkeeper or prostitute, and the artist’s mission was to chronicle and advance the new truth and the new beauty.

This early aesthetic view of modernism fixes on its democratic character. With the erosion of the aristocracy’s power over society went its legitimating adherence to the past in symbols drawn from antiquity. A new freedom went along with this collapse, the liberation of the individual making his way in a world of flux. “It is true that the great tradition is lost,” Baudelaire declared in 1846, “and that the new one is as yet unformed.” A new creativity was thus given room to grow, and it flourished in a world set free of fixed values, given over to intellectual and cultural fashions, and centered on the individual psyche. Marx described this world with awe as well as distaste in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848: “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.”

Around the turn of the century, things began to change. As an artistic movement, modernism’s proliferation of styles and disregard for official strictures mirrored the expansion of its audience—its pluralism and variety. Freed of the salon and the patron, art moved into the marketplace, and as the market spread, so did the art. When the Armory Show introduced the modern European art to America in New York in 1913, modernism was shown to be a movement that was worldwide, expressing an experience of change that was itself fast becoming worldwide. But with the consolidation of middle-class power, the need for a new order was beginning to make itself felt. Instead of the artist-as-revolutionary, exalting the primacy of the individual, art was absorbed into the new order. Otto Wagner, the modernist architect, is a case in point. Distressed at the neurotic potential of modern aimlessness, he defined the architect’s task as one of providing direction, not in the sense of values or goals that guide the individual’s life, but in the literal, functionalist sense

of moving the individual along from one point to the next. The engineer was replacing the artist as the bearer of modernity.

This change signifies that modernity has given way to a calculated process of modernization. The heroic period of modernism is past, its place taken by programmed change. As Sheldon S. Wolin argues, modernism's animating faith in progress has been supplanted by a pervasive fear of disorder. The confidence exemplified by the very term *modern*—the belief that the present, with its release of individuality from the constraints of the past, represents the realization of history's purpose—has been undermined by its own adherence to the virtues of science and a narrow conception of reason. The dominance of the new faith in economic growth through applied science, in turn, has led to the despair described by William E. Connolly, as intellectuals of all political stances have had to acknowledge the incompatibility between modernization's dictates and the original modernist ideals.

As a worldwide phenomenon, modernization has proceeded from the top down—an imposition of economic reasoning and a prepackaged plan for historical development promoted by the First World and accepted by elites in the Third. Much of the world has therefore known modernism only in its modernization guise, and its attendant dislocations have been particularly brutal. François Partant, while recognizing the reality and benefits of global interdependence, suggests an alternative form of development, one that rests on diversity and decentralization and builds from the bottom up.

In a critical review of *democracy*'s first two years of publication, George Shulman argues that the journal's stated aim of advancing democracy is undermined by what he calls its pastoralism and antimodernism. Michael Roth advances the view that modernism and cultural conservatism share a concern for the interpretation of history, and that that recognition of common interest can provide the basis for a creative dialogue.

—N.X.