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MODERNITY AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION



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INTRODUCTION

ORDER, PLANNING, AND REASON

When Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1933, the country was teetering on the brink of collapse. Many people saw hope in the new president, even though he had not yet done anything. For several weeks after his March inauguration, people wrote letters and sent telegrams to the White House expressing their admiration and respect, sometimes comparing his election to a second coming of sorts.¹ Of course they knew he wasn't really the Son of God, nor did they associate his time in office as the arrival of the millennium, yet given the depth of the crisis that was the Great Depression, many people resorted to metaphors rooted in religious meaning to acknowledge the seriousness to the situation. There was in their appropriation and dissemination of this language, where terms such as faith, salvation, conversion, and a host of many more held secular meanings, a recognition that a new era and new way of thinking was necessary to confront the immediacy of the crisis and to build a better future.

Much of their usage of this language was rooted in their understanding of modernity, which held that through reason, order, and planning, a foundation for a better world could be built—a better world that was as much a feeling as a way of being. In many ways these were inseparable. Modernity offered a new way of being, and with that promise came a variety of practices and belief structures that

provided hope for the future. The salvation modernists espoused was not eternal but temporal, tangible, and—for a generation with little to hold on to—practical. Oftentimes this version of modernism manifested itself in organizational structures, but in other times it came through utilizing rhetorical connections to religious understandings and ideals. In the end, modernity's emphasis on order, planning, and reason became part of the way in which people experienced the Depression era and spoke to their commitment and belief that a better world could be built upon the ruin to which they were witnesses. This does not imply that modernity substituted or replaced religion, but that the times demanded new language, new solutions, and new meanings for terms that reflected back on America's religious traditions.

Pare Lorentz's classic documentary on the Resettlement Administration, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), opens with the sounds of Virgil Thomson's religious (or at least spiritual) musical score as the film visually outlines how the country had, in a jeremiad version of the frontier thesis, sinned against the bounty provided by God in the pursuit of wealth. Once the narration begins, spoken in the fashion of a homily, the documentary details how unplanned growth and the relentless rape of natural resources had reduced the country to a shambles, challenging the very meaning of democracy and America's exceptionalism. Even the traditional symbols of American mythology—cowboy, plowman, and citizen soldier—are transformed into symbols of vanity whose mindless exploitation of the country's bounty brought about what came to be called the Great Depression, a label that is in itself an important signifier. Although the documentary dealt specifically with the ravages of the Great Plains and the ensuing Dust Bowl, to the millions of Americans who viewed the film, the connection to their own situation was clear—something had gone terribly wrong and the only solution lay in the faith that through more reasoned planning and organization, a secure future could be expected.²

The narrative of *The Plow* underscores the search during the Depression era for credible answers that would place human agency over that of the supernatural, while at the same time relying on the power of faith to unify ideological divisions. This required a shift in consciousness. John Dewey pointed to this change in 1934, writing how the new secular way comes

with its own set of rites, communion, and collective identity, where the “temple [is] a public institution.” The social modes of education, politics, economics, and culture, he argued, opened the mind to new possibilities that would benefit many while shifting consciousness away from the superstitious nature of organized religion and into the realm of a new way of being—modernism. “Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race,” he concluded, but one that “has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant.”³

The transition of the 1930s involved the acceptance and appropriation of modern solutions and ideas to the issues facing the nation. This process involved making modernity approachable, understandable, and nonthreatening. These three aspects came in diverse manifestations, some organized, most not, but all orbiting the belief that the present situation and the future lay firmly in the hands of human choice, and whatever world lay ahead would come from the application of reason and logic, and the belief that through planning by appropriate experts, salvation in the here and now could be achieved. *Modernity and the Great Depression* examines several significant symbolic and representational manifestations of this process to reveal an ideological shift and its larger implications for US society.

Numerous studies have explored the meaning and context of modernity during the 1930s, in everything from eugenics to literature to architecture. Coming up with a unified definition or set of terms to define modernism and modernity is a task beset with detours, dead ends, and frustration, especially when one tries to locate its meaning after the years following World War II, when scholars tried to lock down definitions for these terms and in doing so lost themselves in the ambiguity of time and space, which, of course, meant more discussion of its meaning and impact. Recent discussions among leaders in the field concerning the terms have done little to clarify the debate, but they do provide a context for understanding the meaning, application, and significance of the terms. Susan Friedman argues that as scholars continue to try to solidify a definition of the terms, the process becomes, like modernism itself, both liberating and enslaving and reflects more who is doing the defining than what is being discussed.

The disagreement between the social sciences and the humanities over what constitutes modernism imagines a sharp divide between a “specific set of historical conditions” that unite liberal social theory of the nation-state with industrial advance and individual liberation, and the “loosely affiliated movements and individuals” who in their artistic expressions break from the past in creating a new consciousness. Yet these are different ways of saying the same thing, she argues, and she lays bare “both the formation of hegemonies and their dissolution . . . [for] modernity is a term at war with itself.”⁴

Daniel Singal, who has spent his career analyzing the meaning of the terms “modernity” and “modernism,” suggests that “exact answers remain elusive.” Oftentimes the terms are connected to modernization, which ignores the ambiguity that is at the heart of modernity, namely, the fear that the same rational designs and ideas applied to technology would somehow lead to the demise of the human spirit. To him and many others, then, modernism reflects a “pattern of beliefs and values” and “comprises a culture.” Within this consciousness, which reaches its apogee during the crisis of the Depression era, those adhering to modernity were forced to recognize the “paradox” of living in a world where things may appear “chaotic” while at the same time attempting to create “order.”⁵ Accepting this ambiguity as part of the meaning of modernity helps better explain how critics of modernization were at the same time adherents to modernity, or how nostalgia worked as a reflective action to reconcile the past (and its failures) with the present. This allows for the interrogation of modernist manifestations during the Depression decade that accepts both the conscious break from the past and search for authenticity, and the recognition of the personal limitations imposed through rational planning, organization, and scientific methodology.

Modernity and the Great Depression places modernism in this context and also suggests that it drew, consciously or not, on American religious traditions. Modernity came to be accepted in large part due to its metaphoric, symbolic, and sometimes functional connection to existing ideologies that can be traced back to the revivalist tradition that was so prevalent in earlier times of crisis and was often connected to the Great Awakenings. The examples discussed here signal the willingness of American society to hear a call to arms for a new way of being, seeing, and discussing the

possibility of solving the problems that plague the human condition. Salvation lies at the center of the promise of modernity, and its potential was espoused, accepted, and celebrated. Modernism, with its calls for a new world while retaining many of the traditional exceptionalist ideals that make it uniquely American, is at the heart of *Modernity and the Great Depression* and outlines the desire for a new road to salvation, yet another Eden.

Central to understanding this concept is the placement of the discussions concerning the definition of modernity/modernism within the specific time and space of the Depression, when the idea was governed by a unique set of circumstances that indicated a clear break from what had been “modern” before. The modernism of the 1930s in many ways developed out of the antimodernist movement of the early part of the twentieth century. The people absorbed many of the issues and critiques, especially regarding the issue of authenticity, which manifested itself in the 1930s version of modernity through their emphasis on order, planning, and reason to create their own authentic understandings, whether it be in government projects in national parks or local playgrounds, or through nostalgic music, massive expos and fairs, and even in reimagining the hearth and home. Through it all, a new modern way was being promoted, one that promised a better world for all. The 1930s witnessed what Terry Smith has labeled a “domestication of the modern,” which was unlike manifestations that occurred before the great crash and after World War II.⁶ Within this context, the unique circumstances of modernism/modernity cannot be defined as a single thing but as many things occurring at the same time, which necessitates an understanding of who, where, and how the term was used and understood. *Modernity and the Great Depression* will steer clear of the debates that dominated the interwar period in fields such as literature, poetry, and art, and instead focus on the replication and appropriation of modernism within American society. But we cannot separate the meaning of “modernism” from its usage, and any study of it must be located within a fixed yet circular place, for no meaning can exist outside of its location. Yet that definition must reflect the ideologies that allowed modernist consciousness to flower.

The Great Depression challenged many Americans’ understanding of the role of government, economics, the workplace, gender, race, social relations—in fact, nearly every aspect of American society underwent

some type of reconsideration. Order, planning, and reason: these were the touchstone ideas that both defined and drove modernity during the Depression era. Given the depth and seriousness of the crisis, people in nearly all facets of life put their faith and hope in this trinity to bring about if not a solution, at least a salve that might point to a better future. The commitment to solving the problems that led to and were part of the Depression focused on taking the best practices of the past and combining them with the new ideas brokered in the midst of the crisis. The modernism present during this time period and the examples given in this volume outline how the ideals of order, planning, and reason became an ontology that aided in the shift of consciousness in American society toward the symbolic and practical advantages of modernity.

One of the primary lenses through which to view this process is the acceptance and appropriation of the tenets of modernist thought, which in most cases involves the role and impact of scientific methodology, reason, and organizational planning on the daily lives of most citizens and how these processes project the future. The modernism/modernity that I examine borrows from a variety of sources but is best drawn from Christina Cogdell's *Eugenic Design*. She places modernity within the Depression era and locates it within the promise of salvation in the future, where "scientists, designers, corporate leaders, politicians and ministers" were joined by the vast majority of the American people to promote, "inspire, define, and create the world of tomorrow."⁷ This view encapsulates the most significant aspect of modernism/modernity during the era of the 1930s, namely, to make modernity approachable, easier to accept and understand, and, finally, more relevant to the Common Man's daily life. Americans in the midst of the worst crisis of their era adopted new ways of seeing their world; they trusted and believed that these new means would offer them a solution where others had failed. Scholar Ástrædður Eysteinnsson suggests that the vagueness of the definitional characteristics of modernity/modernism allows for its utility as a lens of analysis for the twentieth century, especially as it signifies a change in consciousness. The debate about its exact definition concerns more its meaning and application, particularly as society becomes more accepting of the benefits and drawbacks of modernization, and becomes in part the definition of

modernity. During the Depression era, as art historians Jeffrey L. Meikle, Christopher Wilk, Terry Smith, and others have argued, modernism became normalized to Americans, made up of, as Wilk suggests, a “loose collection of ideas” linking the present to the past and future, locating itself within the broad cosmopolitan space, replicating and, according to Meikle, “incorporating icons of the modern into one’s own personal environment.”⁸ The domestication of modernity cannot be separated from the acceptance and proliferation of the tenets of modernization exemplified by the assembly line and the structural changes—both human and architectural—that came previous to the crash. The 1930s became a time when the meaning of modernity—not in grammatical or definitional terms but in its acceptance, application, and repetition—reached its apogee and served as the foundation for a consciousness shift.⁹

“It is a day of darkness and of light, a day of despair and hope,” wrote George Richards in 1934, and “only through judgment can redemption draw nigh, God’s order be vindicated, and man’s noblest aspirations be attained.”¹⁰ Language like this suggested the awareness that a clear break had occurred. Indeed, when accepting the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party in 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt invoked this call for renewal: “Out of every crisis, every tribulation, every disaster, mankind rises with some share of greater knowledge, of higher decency, of purer purpose.”¹¹ Earlier crises provided him and many others with extensive evidence that when social, economic, and political events shook the spirit of the country, a religious revival soon followed, or even precipitated the troubling events. When business statistician cum evangelical Roger Babson declared in 1936, after outlining the economic causes of earlier Great Awakenings, that “all signs indicate that America will soon again be swept by a spiritual revival,”¹² he echoed the sentiments of many religious leaders in the country. The collapse created an opportunity, they believed, to return to more traditional values, to distance the country from the humanist and secular ideas that seemingly led to this crisis. Both the first and second Great Awakenings were led by emerging evangelical movements and resulted in their powerful position within American Protestantism and society in general. Also, much akin to the situation of the 1930s, earlier Awakenings were heterogeneous, made up of diverse ideas

concerning salvation blended into a paradigm that ensured the primacy of Christianity and encouraged a new way of thinking.¹³

Modernism's epistemology develops out of the transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the rise of industrial capitalism; the concepts of social Darwinism, the scientific method, and pragmatism; and the reformist nature of the Progressive Era, all combining to create an atmosphere in which the flowering of liberal humanitarians could blossom. This modernist ideology celebrates and endorses the positive influences of consumerism, industrial production and efficiency, scientific inquiry and application, cosmopolitanism (with a reverence for the past), and tolerance and diversity in social, economic, cultural, and political realms. These attributes define the modernism disseminated in so many varieties during the Depression era, which espoused that human initiative could and must solve the problems and issues created by humans through the application of reason, planning, and effort. Not inherently against organized religion, it advocated for human activism for human concerns and for organized religion for those things spiritual.

Modernity and the Great Depression is a study of being, an ontology, an examination of how the abstract idea of modernism became manifest, replicated, accepted, celebrated, and even worshiped in American society during the Depression era. Its occurrence during this period of economic calamity speaks to the power of its potential—traditional ideals had failed, and new ideas seemed to portend a better and more glorious future. Scholars have argued that during the 1930s, organized religions in the United States underwent a spiritual crisis and even decline. Robert Handy's seminal article from a generation ago, "American Religious Depression," argues that beginning in the 1920s (and carrying through the next fifteen years), religion in the United States suffered a crisis in spirit. For Protestantism, the tenets of modernism were simply too complicated to battle or absorb, and many denominations lost relevance to the scientific, rational, secular humanism of modernity. Even as church membership remained steady or even grew, the role and meaning of religion underwent redefinition. This "observable spiritual lethargy" challenged how Americans viewed their religious beliefs and helped lay the foundation for modernity's acceptance during the period.¹⁴

“It is clear we are passing through an unparalleled crisis in human history,” fundamentalist minister George Richards believed, and the “day of the Lord is at hand.”¹⁵ The series of cataclysmic events that shook America to its foundations after 1929 and throughout the Depression era encouraged biblical comparisons. The country had fallen from grace for its sins against nature, it seemed, and was being punished for not following the true path of its covenant. Only through sanctification, or some ritual freeing us from our sins, could we return to the straight and narrow. Many historical accounts of the Great Depression from the crash until the arrival of FDR and the New Deal paint this dire portrait; indeed, the apocalyptic portrayal is one of the long-standing tropes of Depression-era historiography. The decline in industrial output, the collapse of financial institutions, foreclosures, farm failures, suicides, and family breakdowns all suggested that the end time had come. Herbert Hoover’s lack of leadership, at least as the people came to perceive him, only reinforced this loss of hope; as Malcolm Cowley suggested, “The secure world of their childhood had fallen apart.”¹⁶

The call for revival in the early years of the Depression era had deep roots that go back at least to the turn of the century as the effects of industrial capitalism, urbanization, immigration, communism, and of course, evolution had a cumulative effect on American society. However, as the Depression deepened, the call for spiritual revival was challenged by secular modernists, who suggested that the path to sanctification came through new ideas made necessary in light of the failure of the old. Central to their argument was the adoption of new symbols and meanings to explain the individual’s place within this new world. With much the same enthusiasm afforded to religious conviction, terms such as “belief,” “conversion,” and “salvation” took on new meanings relating to the here and now, whether in advertising, government policy, or other aspects of the modern world. During the Depression era, it seemed that no matter where one looked, one would see a call for something new, suggesting both a break from the past and a faith in the future.

In many ways, this process held generational appeal, as the parents of what became the Baby Boom came of age and had to make economic, political, social, cultural, ideological, and even religious decisions far

different from those of their parents as they faced a rapidly changing world with an increasingly uncertain future. Many Americans recognized the need for an agenda of broad social reform to challenge the status quo, echoing Dewey's sentiments when he wrote that "the only form of enduring social organization that is now possible is one in which the new forces of productivity are cooperatively controlled and used in the interest of effective liberty and the cultural development of the individuals that constitute society."¹⁷

Modernity and the Great Depression does not suggest that a civil religion replaced traditional faiths.¹⁸ It is clear that during the 1930s the acceptance of those things labeled as modern, under the definitional characteristics described above, reached its apogee. Of course, this process had an antecedent tracing back to the late nineteenth century and was manifest in a variety of ways before the Depression era, but the *break* that was the Great Depression in a way forced or made it imperative that a new way of being, of thinking, of planning for the future be discussed and in many instances implemented for the betterment of all. Modernity, with its emphasis on planning, reason, and scientific methodology, played a central role in this process. In some instances it served many of the same ontological needs for its adherents and even used some of the terms linked with religion, such as faith, salvation, and belief. In other instances modernity functioned in ways that religious organizations had in the past, providing symbolic and real presentations of positive changes that could come about through practical commitment to its ideals. Oftentimes these were made manifest in institutional situations, as in government programs or large-scale celebrations that involved complex planning and encouraged general societal acceptance and approval. And still for others, modernity outlined solutions that pointed to a future that was certain and hopeful.

The role and meaning of modernism during the 1930s is therefore as complex as its multiple definitional characteristics. What this study tries to do is examine how modernism was appropriated and made acceptable during this important epoch and how this process could be linked in a variety of ways to our understanding of American society. How did some Americans come to accept and/or witness modernism as a means of salvation? Was the proliferation of modernist tenets simply a rhetorical

device used to signify the changes that were omnipresent in this time of crisis? American society's ability to accept, utilize, and propagate modernism's many attributes (which defines "modernity") encouraged it to link reason and planning with progress and therefore called forth a new way of thinking and seeing the world around it. The link between progress and modernism was inescapable, for as Charles Beard wrote in 1933, they meant "that mankind, by making use of science and invention, can progressively emancipate itself from plagues, famines, and social disasters and subjugate the materials and forces of the earth to the purposes of the good life—here and now."¹⁹ This sentiment was echoed throughout society, and incoming President Roosevelt acknowledged that "this new generation of ours stands ready to help us seek action" in order to remake American society that was languishing in the aftermath of the crash.²⁰ The decade of the Depression was a clear break, suggesting a new order. As cultural critic Stuart Hall has argued, "What is important are the significant breaks—where old lines of thought are disrupted" and new ones are "regrouped around a different set of premises and themes."²¹ Unknowingly summarizing this consciousness shift, Kenneth Saunders wrote in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1931, "To understand the movements of our time we must have a philosophy which harmonizes the various elements of life. We cannot go anywhere [without] a compass."²²

On June 28, 1934, FDR addressed the nation in what would become one of the regular features of his administration, the Fireside Chat. Designed as a homespun way to speak directly to the people, the presentation called up the image of a simpler time, when commonsense conversations took place around the family hearth and complex questions were broken down by basic reason and logic. The other side of this bucolic presentation involved the modern means of its dissemination—the radio and its complex interrelationship with electricity, technology, factory management, and coordinated networks. To further muddy the image, FDR delivered the speeches from the less-than-pastoral radio room in the White House (nowhere near a fireplace). Yet to many Americans it was as if the president were right there in their parlor. He used this 1934 speech to defend his administration's early efforts to stem the tide of hopelessness ravaging the American landscape and to suggest that although some critics

had attacked his policies as radically different from those used by past administrations, such steps were necessary to build a better tomorrow. In order to better illustrate the situation to his listening audience, Roosevelt related how in the coming summer the White House would undergo renovations to add much-needed space and “modern electric wiring and modern plumbing and modern means of keeping the offices cool . . . [while maintaining] the simplicity and strength of the structure. . . . In the face of every modern test[,] the necessities of modern government business require constant reorganization and rebuilding.” Roosevelt concluded by saying that “our new structure is a part of and a fulfillment of the old.”²³ In so doing, and perhaps without knowing, the president enunciated the basic tenets to be outlined in this monograph.

Modernity and the Great Depression will explore the ways in which politics, culture, and society witnessed and participated in this transition. What role did language play in the contest for meaning and utility of the terms and ideas of “modernism” and “modernity”? How does the repetition of modernist imagery introduce and reinforce itself and inspire a greater appreciation of modern tenets? What role did specific organizations, institutional structures, and events play in exposing and promoting the social values and progressive impulses of modern society? In what ways were performances (and the many forms of their dissemination) designed to document a shared past and a unified future? These themes weave their way through each of the five chapters, whether discussing the contested definitional terrain of the terms “modernism” and “modernity” among religious and secular leaders, the role and influence of the federal government under the Roosevelt administration in the promotion of modernism through the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration, the six American world’s fairs held during the era, or even how the writings and opinions of the nation’s leading interior decorators and the advice they gave American women regarding modernity in the home and how vernacular and cultivated music resonated with its generation and harkened back to the past as it presented the salvation of the future. The decades that followed World War II would broaden the appeal of modernity to everyday life, for example, in the laying out and construction of Levittown and its suburban cohort, or the drive to land a man on the

moon by the end of the 1960s. However, the convulsions of the Cold War, civil rights, Vietnam, and deindustrialization challenged the core beliefs of modernity and ushered in a new era best exemplified by the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980.

In the end, during the Depression and lingering into the postwar era, modernity became one idea that unified the American people with a common belief that the future was theirs, both to define and capture, if only they kept the faith.



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