Question No 2

Discuss the nature of arguments presented by scholars such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Giddens on the subject of modernity. Explain in a locally relevant manner.

The term **Modernity** refers to era. Historians consider the period from 1500 to 1800, as [Early Modern Period](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Modern_Period) and say [Modern era](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_era) starts sometime during the [18th century](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/18th_century). According to this thought, [industrialization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrialization) during the [19th century](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/19th_century) marks the first phase of modernity, while the [20th century](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_century) marks the second. Some schools of thought hold that modernity ended in the late [20th century](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/20th_century), replaced by [post-modernism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-modernism), while others would extend modernity to cover the developments denoted by [post-modernism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-modernism) and into the present. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens saw modernity as a modern society or industrial civilization with a certain set of attitudes towards the world as open to transformation by human intervention. He also saw the society as a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy. He mentioned that this society is associated with certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. It is a society, a complex of institutions, lives in the future rather than the past.

Modernity (Anthony Giddens)

Giddens was concerned with the question of what is the characteristic about [social institutions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_institution) in various points of history. Giddens agrees that there are very specific changes that mark our current era, but argues that it is not a "post-modern era", but just a "radicalised modernity era". Anyhow, Giddens differentiates between pre-modern, modern and late (high) modern societies and doesn't dispute that important changes have occurred but takes a neutral stance towards those changes. He stated saying that it offers both unprecedented opportunities and unparalleled dangers. He also stresses that we haven't really gone beyond modernity. It's just a developed, de-traditionalised, radicalised, 'late' modernity. Therefore what was referred as 'post-modern' is to Giddens nothing more than the most extreme instances of a developed modernity.

Giddens concentrates on a contrast between traditional (pre-modern) [culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture) and post-traditional (modern) culture. In traditional societies, individual actions are not matters that have to be extensively considered and thought about, because available choices are already predetermined (by the customs, traditions, etc.). As in the case in Sri Lanka and other South Asian countries the roles of individuals in their respective families and the society are determined by the tradition. Any behaviour that contradicts to the tradition is severely punished even by his or her family members. In contrast, in post-traditional society, people are much less concerned with the precedents set by previous generations, and options are at least as open as the [law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law) and [public opinion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_opinion) will allow. Therefore individual actions now require much more analysis and thought before they are taken. Society becomes much more [reflexive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reflexivity_%28social_theory%29) and aware, something Giddens is fascinated with, illustrating it with examples ranging from formal government at one end of the scale to intimate sexual relationships at the other. Giddens examines three realms in particular: the experience of [identity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_%28social_science%29), connections of [intimacy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intimacy) and [political institutions](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_institution).

The most defining property of modernity, according to Giddens, is that we are disembeded from [time](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time) and [space](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space). In pre-modern societies, space was the area in which one moved, time was the experience one had while moving. In modern societies, however, the social space is no longer confined by the boundaries set by the space in which one moves. One can now imagine what other spaces look like, even if he has never been there. In this regard, Giddens talks about virtual space and virtual time. Another distinctive property of modernity lies in the field of [knowledge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge). In pre-modern societies, it was the elders who possessed the knowledge: they were definable in time and space. In modern societies we must rely on [expert systems](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expert_systems). These are not present in time and space, but we must trust them. Even if we trust them, we know that something could go wrong: there's always a risk we have to take. Also the technologies which we use, and which transform constraints into means, hold risks. Consequently, there is always a heightened sense of uncertainty in contemporary societies. It is also in this regard that Giddens uses the image of a '[juggernaut](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juggernaut)': modernity is said to be like an unsteerable juggernaut travelling through space.

MARX

Karl Marx in his *the labour theory of value* argues that the profit of the capitalist was based on the exploitation of the labourer. Capitalists performed the rather simple trick of paying the workers less than they deserved. This surplus value which was retained and reinvested by the capitalist was the basis of the entire capitalist system. He was critical of the political economists for failing to see the inherent conflict between capitalists and labourers and for denying the need for radical change in the economic order called socialism. He found that the workers were alienated from what they produce. In Sri Lanka we could see the plantation workers never consume the quality tea they produce. The textile workers never are able to wear what they produce. The values of the goods produces are far more valuable than the producers. Marx dreamt of a socialist society that will take control of the economic activity and the workers will not be alienated form what they produce.

Capitalism is a central feature of the modern world and Marx is one of its most important analysts and critics. This makes the study of his arguments difficult.

There are two questions posed by contemporary social theorists: First, what are Marx's essential contributions to our understanding of the elemental features of the modern social world? To what extent do Marx's analysis of value, commodity fetishism and capital accumulation mesh with contemporary analyses of modernity? Second, how pertinent are Marx's critique of capitalism and his analysis of class struggle to the basic political struggles occurring in the modern social world? To what extent are Marx's concepts of class struggle and revolution helpful to those who confront racism, sexism, ecological destruction, and authoritarian governments?

However, Antonio[[1]](#footnote-1) argues that Marx's comments about revolution and communism are for the most part brief and sketchy. They do not have the same rigor or analytic or empirical foundation that characterizes his analysis of capitalism. Antonio also correctly notes that Marx's ideas about revolution and communism have been used to justify some of the most oppressive regimes and barbaric events in human history, perhaps because the political analysis was not as thoroughly developed as the economic and class analysis of capitalism. So, the question about the relevance of Marxist politics to the modern world cannot be answered as clearly or as easily as the first question.

The political divides of modernity appear to transcend the socialist project Marx envisioned. At least, it is not clear that Marx's analysis of conflict and revolution can easily inform or accommodate protests associated with ethnicity, race, gender and globalization. But Marx had a deep and sincere interest in eliminating unnecessary human suffering. He was clearly interested in emancipating individuals and society from both capitalist exploitation and political oppression. Thus, Marx's politics should be seriously studied, although it remains to be seen whether the class divides in the contemporary social world will revive his socialist project.

MAX WEBER

Weber’s work was fundamentally a theory of rationalisation. Weber classified the authority systems in the society into three categories as traditional, charismatic and rational-legal. Among these the full scale development is possible only within the rational-legal authority system. The Western industrialised countries were able to develop this system but other countries including Sri Lanka remain dominated by traditional or charismatic authority systems. Traditional authority stems from belief systems valued and preserved for a long period over many generations. Though Sri Lanka has adopted many modern practices such as democracy, human rights conventions and open economy the people are unable to break the malpractices based on caste system, religious rites, ethnic superiority and gender inequality which are hindrances to the development.

EMILE DURKHEIM

Durkheim descends from a long line of rabbis and studied to be one. He rejected a traditional academic career in philosophy and sought to acquire the scientific training needed to contribute to the moral guidance of society. His goal was to communicate a moral system to the educators so that they would pass the system to young people. He was politically liberal, but took a more conservative position intellectually. Most of his work was devoted to the study of social order. Though he differentiated between two types of social facts-material and nonmaterial, his main focus was on nonmaterial facts such as culture and social institutions. His focus there was a comparative analysis of what held society together in the primitive and modern cases. He concluded that earlier societies were held together primarily by nonmaterial social facts, specifically, a strongly held common morality, or what he called a strong collective conscience. However because of the complexities of modern society, there had been a decline in the strength of the collective conscience. The primary bond in the modern world was an intricate division of labour, which tied people to others in dependency relationships. However Durkheim felt that the modern division of labour brought with it several “pathologies”; it was, in other words, an inadequate method of holding society together. Durkheim did not feel that revolution was needed to solve these problems. Rather he suggested a variety of reforms that could “patch up” the modern system and keep it functioning. Durkheim examined the primitive society in order to find the roots of religion and then came to argue that society and religion were one and the same. Religion is the way society expressed itself in the form of nonmaterial social fact. Because he identified society with God, Durkheim was not inclined to urge social revolution.

1. Antonio, Robert J., Ed. (2003). Marx and Modernity [↑](#footnote-ref-1)