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From the Editor

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FROM THE EDITOR

Aro Velmet

“Man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, and ... he will disappear again as soon as ... knowledge has discovered a new form.”¹ As Michel Foucault observed, what we perceive as immutable, deeply individual human nature is often little more than a historical, culturally and socially constructed being. The undefined ‘humanity’ that is the basis of liberal society and the foundation of our personal consciousness has fallen far from transcendence and turned into a peculiarity of the modern condition. In this discourse, the historian is an invaluable analyst in illuminating the origins, shape and character of this temporally bound being called ‘the modern man’. To this end, the first issue of the seventeenth volume of the *Penn History Review* is dedicated to the problem of modernity.

Industrialization, urbanization, globalization, and other similar social processes are often first to come to mind, when one thinks of modernity. Still, though they are important symptoms of the modern condition (and topics that many of the essays in the *Review* tackle), they hardly constitute the essence of modernity. Foucault situates the core of modernity on the level of the *episteme*, the mode of thinking particular to the industrialized, overpopulated and heterogenous era in which we live. Modern thought, in his view, is defined by the idea of a universal man, rational and individualist, yet plagued at the same time by the limits of this discourse.

Others have taken this definition further, situating the condition of modernity in both the structures of the wider social apparatus, and the individual experience coming to grips with that apparatus. One such definition, by Anthony Giddens, easily transcends the orthodoxy of the social sciences and can, without conceit, be called poetry:

For these images I suggest we should substitute that of a juggernaut – a runaway engine of enormous power, which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control and which could rend itself asunder. The juggernaut crushes those who resist it, and while it sometimes seems to have a steady path, there are times when it veers away erratically in directions we cannot foresee. The ride is by no means wholly unpleasant or unrewarding; it can often be exhilarating and filled with hopeful

anticipation. But, so long as the institutions of modernity endure, we shall never be completely able to control either the path or the pace of the journey. In turn, we shall never be able to feel entirely secure, because the terrain across which it runs is fraught with risks of high consequence. Feelings of ontological security and existential anxiety shall exist together in ambivalence.²

Perhaps a poetic definition of modernity is indeed the best, since its institutions, specific features and intrinsic problems are many and varied. Its consequences are evident in the form microhistorical developments as well as in the form of sweeping social changes that span centuries and reach across continents. The atomic bomb paranoia that pervaded the minds of ordinary people during the Cold War is equally a facet of modernity as the history of colonization or the growing alienation between bureaucratic structures and individual agents. We hope that this selection of essays that the Editorial Board is proud to publish goes some way in illustrating the scope and depth of this complex issue.

The origins of modern institutions go back well beyond the 19th century, the generally accepted threshold of the modern era. Halley Goodman explores the founding of the Bank of England in the context of changing economic and political circumstances of the 17th century. The founding of the Bank accelerated a broader social reorganization, including the replacement of a bullion-based economy with a modern, credit-based economy. On the one hand, this change was symptomatic of the changing needs of a rapidly urbanizing society with numerous trade interests in both Europe and abroad. On the other hand, it paved the way for even faster industrialization and enabled the construction of Britain's colonial empire in the 18th century.

The relationship between colonisers and colonised, the interplay of different cultures and the resulting power hierarchies is another aspect of modernity the *Review* explores. From 17th century London we follow the British Empire to 19th century India, as our second essay, by Sasha Riser-Kositsky looks at the transformation of the Indian caste system. The essay outlines how this traditional form of political differentiation has been changed into a powerful social hierarchy that lies at the core of much of the discrimination and oppression happening in India even today. The colonial experience, specifically the appropriation and codification of the caste system by the British to facilitate colonial rule, is at the center of this transformation. Though the British themselves saw the caste system as yet another sign

of a backward and barbaric society, their attempts at breaking down the caste distinctions only served to reinforce and expand the political hierarchies into almost every sphere of Hindu life.

Modernity, as the example of the caste system shows, is often most salient at the intersection of material conditions and imagined structures. Alex Zhang's essay on the intellectual and cultural responses to modernity in early 20th century Shanghai looks at another instance of an encounter with the *other*; the coexistence of Westerners and Chinese in modern Shanghai. There, modernity was shaped by the responses to it. For its Western inhabitants modernity signified the triumph of capitalism and its ultimate realization, for the Chinese - a tenuous conflict between the decline of Confucianism and the rise of a Western identity.

Finally, we return to Philadelphia in the 1960s, to explore various responses to problems inherent to modernity. Eric Augenbraum, in an essay accepted for publication a semester before he joined the Editorial Board of the *Review*, examines economic outreach programs during the War on Poverty. Contrasting the Community Action Program and the Opportunities Industrializations Centers, Augenbraum offers an ideological explanation for the failure of the former and success of the latter. The CAP created a platform enabling black political empowerment that could have posed a challenge to local authority, whereas the OIC's acceptance of poverty as a personal deficiency allowed it to endure and thrive through the Nixon administration.

The *Review* is pleased to announce that it is making all published essays from the last five semesters available online to the wider academic community through Scholarly Commons. Visitors can browse issues and contact editors at <http://repository.upenn.edu/phr/> or by following the link on the History Department Website.

The collection and publication of these papers was the collaborative effort of many individuals. The *Review* would like to thank the many members of the history faculty who encouraged their students to submit essays for publication. The Editorial Board would like to especially thank Dr. Kathy Peiss, Chair of the History Department, for her support and guidance. We also thank the University of Pennsylvania and the History Department in particular for its financial support of the *Review*, its efforts to foster undergraduate research, and the commitment of its faculty to cultivating future historians.

Aro Velmet
Co-Editor in Chief

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York: Random House, 1994, xxiii

² Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1990, 138