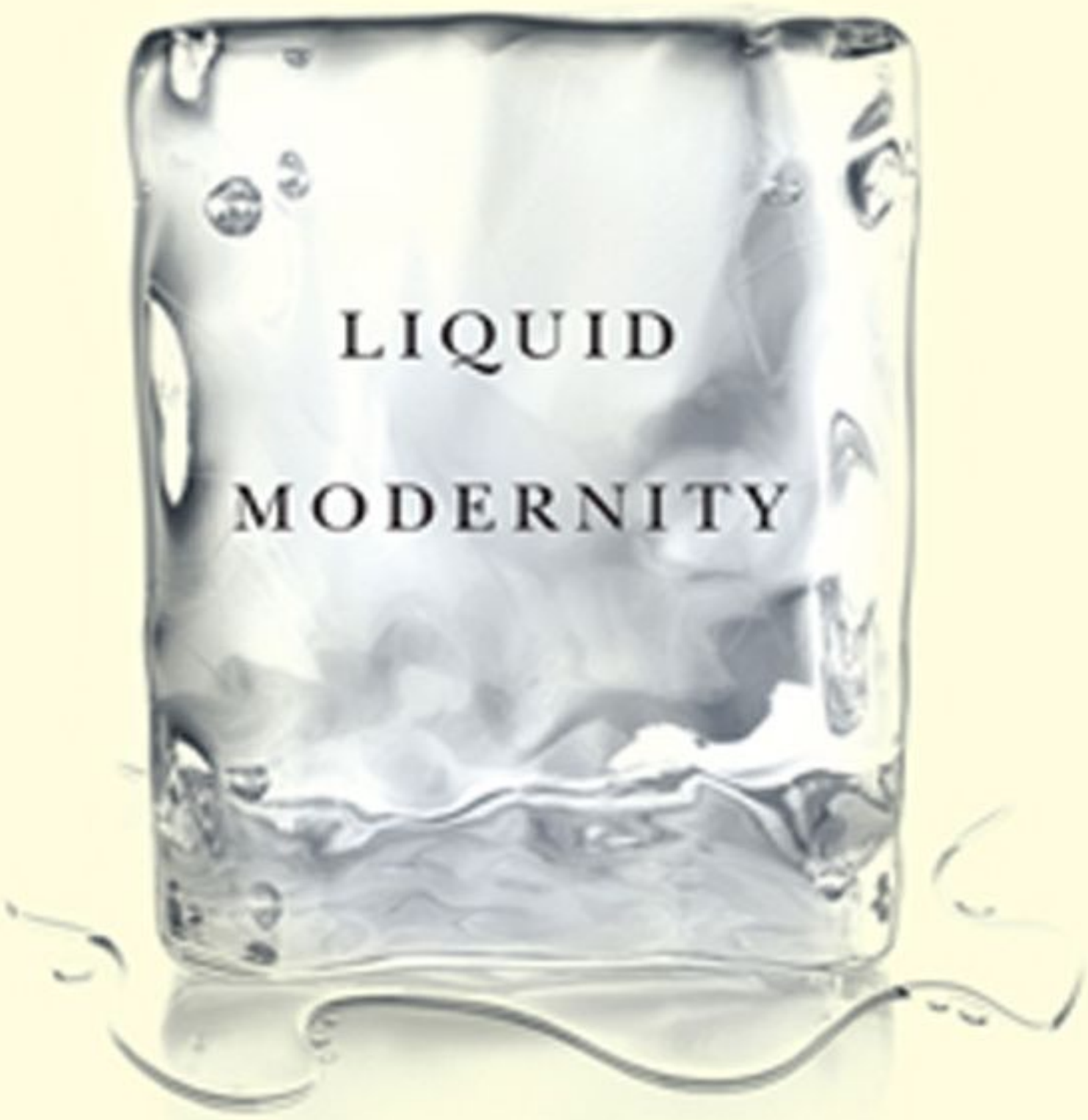

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Liquid Modernity

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Contents

Foreword to the 2012 Edition

Liquid Modernity Revisited

When more than ten years ago I tried to unpack the meaning of the metaphor of ‘liquidity’ in its application to the form of life currently practised, one of the mysteries obtrusively haunting me and staunchly resisting resolution was the status of the liquid-modern human condition: was it an intimation, an early version, an augury or a portent of things to come? Or was it, rather, a temporary and transient – as well as an unfi nished, incomplete and inconsistent – interim settlement; an interval between two distinct, yet viable and durable, complete and consistent answers to the challenges of human togetherness?

I have not thus far come anywhere near to a resolution of that quandary, but I am increasingly inclined to surmise that we presently fi nd ourselves in a time of ‘interregnum’ – when the old ways of doing things no longer work, the old learned or inherited modes of life are no longer suitable for the current *conditio humana*, but when the new ways of tackling the challenges and new modes of life better suited to the new conditions have not as yet been invented, put in place and set in operation . . . We don’t yet know which of the extant forms and settings will need to be ‘liquidized’ and replaced, though none seems to be immune to criticism and all or almost all of them have at one time or another been earmarked for replacement.

Most importantly, unlike our ancestors, we don’t have a clear image of a ‘destination’ towards which we seem to be moving – which needs to be a model of *global* society, a global economy, global politics, a global jurisdiction . . . Instead, we react to the latest trouble, experimenting, groping in the dark. We try to diminish carbon dioxide pollution by dismantling coal-fed power plants and replacing them with nuclear power plants, only to conjure up the spectres of Chernobyl and Fukushima to hover above us . . . We feel rather than know (and many of us refuse to acknowledge) that power (that is, the ability to do things) has been

separated from politics (that is, the ability to decide which things need to be done and given priority), and so in addition to our confusion about ‘what to do’ we are now in the dark about ‘who is going to do it’. The sole agencies of collective purposive action bequeathed to us by our parents and grandparents, confi ned as they are to the boundaries of nation-states, are clearly inadequate, considering the global reach of our problems, and of their sources and consequences . . .

We remain of course as modern as we were before; but these ‘we’ who are modern have considerably grown in numbers in recent years. We may well say that by now all or almost all of us, in every or almost every part of the planet, have become modern. And that means that today, unlike a decade or two ago, every land on the planet, with only a few exceptions, is subject to the obsessive, compulsive, unstoppable change that is nowadays called ‘modernization’, and to everything that goes with it, including the continuous production of human redundancy, and the social tensions it is bound to cause.

Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects – but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change. To ‘be modern’ means to modernize – compulsively, obsessively; not so much just ‘to be’, let alone to keep its identity intact, but forever ‘becoming’, avoiding completion, staying underdefi ned. Each new structure which replaces the previous one as soon as it is declared old-fashioned and past its use-by date is only another momentary settlement – acknowledged as temporary and ‘until further notice’. Being always, at any stage and at all times, ‘post-something’ is also an undetachable feature of modernity. As time fl ows on, ‘modernity’ changes its forms in the manner of the legendary Proteus . . . What was some time ago dubbed (erroneously) ‘post-modernity’, and what I’ve chosen to call, more to the point, ‘liquid modernity’, is the growing conviction that change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty. A hundred years ago ‘to be modern’ meant to chase ‘the fi nal state of perfection’ – now it means an infi nity of improvement, with no ‘fi nal state’ in sight and none desired.

I did not think earlier and do not think now of the solidity versus liquidity conundrum as a dichotomy; I view those two conditions as a couple locked, inseparably, by a dialectical bond (the kind of bond François Lyotard probably had in mind when he observed that one can’t be modern without

being postmodern fi rst . . .). After all, it was the quest for the solidity of things and states that most often triggered, kept in motion and guided their liquefaction; liquidity was not an adversary, but an effect of that quest for solidity, having no other parenthood, even when (or if) the parent might deny the legitimacy of the offspring. In turn, it was the formlessness of the oozing, leaking and fl owing liquid that prompted the efforts at cooling, damping and moulding. If there is anything that permits a distinction between the 'solid' and 'liquid' phases of modernity (that is, arranging them in an order of succession), it is the change in both the manifest and the latent purposes behind the effort.

The original cause of the solids melting was not resentment against solidity as such, but dissatisfaction with the degree of solidity of the extant and inherited solids: purely and simply, the bequeathed solids were found not to be solid enough (insufficiently resistant or immunized to change) by the standards of the order-obsessed and compulsively order-building modern powers. Subsequently, however (in our part of the world, to this day), solids came to be viewed and accepted as transient, 'until further notice' condensations of liquid magma; temporary settlements, rather than ultimate solutions. Flexibility has replaced solidity as the ideal condition to be pursued of things and affairs. All solids (including those that are momentarily desirable) are tolerated only in as far as they promise to remain easily and obediently fusible on demand. An adequate technology of melting down again must be in hand even before the effort starts of putting together a durable structure, fi rming it up and solidifying it. A reliable assurance of the right and ability to dismantle the constructed structure must be given before the job of construction starts in earnest. Fully 'biodegradable' structures, starting to disintegrate the moment they have been assembled, are nowadays the ideal, and most, if not all structures, must struggle to measure up to this standard.

To cut a long story short, if in its 'solid' phase the heart of modernity was in controlling and fi xing the future, in the 'liquid' phase the prime concern moved to ensuring the future was not mortgaged, and to averting the threat of any pre-emptive exploitation of the still undisclosed, unknown and unknowable opportunities the future was hoped to and was bound to bring. Nietzsche's spokesman Zarathustra, in anticipation of this human condition, bewailed 'the loitering of the present moment' that threatens to make the Will – burdened with the thick and heavy deposits of its past

accomplishments and misdeeds – ‘gnash its teeth’, groan and sag, crushed by their weight . . . The fear of things fi xed too fi rmly to permit them being dismantled, things overstaying their welcome, things tying our hands and shackling our legs, the fear of following Faustus to hell because of that blunder he committed of wishing to arrest a beautiful moment and make it stay forever, was traced by Jean-Paul Sartre back to our visceral, extemporal and inborn resentment of touching slimy or viscous substances; and yet, symp-tomatically, that fear was only pinpointed as a prime mover of human history at the threshold of the liquid modern era. That fear, in fact, signalled modernity’s imminent arrival. And we may view its appearance as a fully and truly paradigmatic watershed in history . . .

Of course, as I’ve stated so many times, the whole of modernity stands out from preceding epochs by its compulsive and obsessive modernizing – and modernizing means liquefaction, melting and smelting. But – but! Initially, the major preoccupation of the modern mind was not so much the technology of smelting (most of the apparently solid structures around seemingly melted from their own incapacity to hold out) as the design of the moulds into which the molten metal was to be poured and the technology of keeping it there. The modern mind was after perfection – and the state of perfection it hoped to reach meant in the last account an end to strain and hard work, as all further change could only be a change for the worse. Early on, change was viewed as a preliminary and interim measure, which it was hoped would lead to an age of stability and tranquillity – and so also to comfort and leisure. It was seen as a necessity confi ned to the time of transition from the old, rusty, partly rotten, crumbling and fi ssiparous, and otherwise unreliable and altogether inferior structures, frames and arrangements, to their made-to-order and ultimate, because perfect, replacements – windproof, waterproof, and indeed history-proof . . . Change was, so to speak, a movement towards the splendid vision on the horizon: the vision of an order, or (to recall Talcott Parsons’s crowning synthesis of modern pursuits) a ‘self-equilibrating system’, able to emerge victorious from every imaginable disturbance, stubbornly and irrevocably returning back to its settled state: an order resulting from a thorough and irrevocable ‘skewing of probabilities’ (maximizing the probability of some events, minimizing the likelihood of others). In the same way as accidents, contingencies, melting pots, ambiguity, ambivalence, fl uidity and other banes and nightmares of order-builders, change was seen (and tackled) as a

temporary irritant – and most certainly not undertaken for its own sake (it is the other way round nowadays: as Richard Sennett observed, perfectly viable organizations are now gutted just to prove their ongoing viability).

The most respected and infl uential minds among nineteenth-century economists expected economic growth to go on 'until such time as all human needs are met', and no longer – and then to be replaced by a 'stable economy', reproducing itself year by year with the same volume and content. The problem of 'living with difference' was also viewed as a temporary discomfort: the confus-ingly variegated world, continually thrown out of joint by clashes of difference and battles between apparently irreconcilable oppo-sites, was to end up in the peaceful, uniform, monotonous tranquillity of a classlessness thoroughly cleansed of confl icts and antagonisms – with the help of a (revolutionary) 'war to end all wars', or of (evolutionary) adaptation and assimilation. The two hot-headed youngsters from Rhineland, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, watched with admiration as the capitalist furnace did the melting job that needed to be performed to usher us into just this kind of stable, trouble-free society. Baudelaire praised his favourite 'modern painter', Constantin Guys, for spying eternity inside a fl eeting moment. In short, modernization then was a road with an *a priori* fi xed, preordained fi nishing line; a movement destined to work itself out of a job.

It still took some time to discover or to decree that modernity without compulsive and obsessive modernization is no less an oxymoron than a wind that does not blow, or a river that does not fl ow . . . The modern form of life moved from the job of melting inferior solids that were not solid enough to the job of melting solids as such, unviable because of their excessive solidity. Perhaps it had performed this kind of job from the start (wise after the fact, we are now convinced that it did) – but its spokesmen would have hotly protested had that been suggested to them in the times of James Mill, Baudelaire or, for that matter, the authors of the Communist Manifesto. At the threshold of the twentieth century, Eduard Bernstein was shouted down by the Establishment Chorus of social democracy, and angrily excommunicated by the Socialist Establishment's Areopagus, when he dared to suggest that 'the goal is nothing, the movement is everything'. There was an essential axiological difference between Baudelaire and Marinetti, separated by a few decades – despite their apparently shared topic. And this precisely was the difference that made the difference . . .