

The analyses of Foucault and Habermas help us to understand the phenomenon called modernity. Foucault believes that modernity is an attitude: a way of thinking, feeling, acting and behaving. He rejects the view that modernity is an epoch – a period of history preceded by premodernity and followed by postmodernity. The features of modernity are:-

1. “Modernity is [often] characterized in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment.” [Foucault – “What is Enlightenment?”] Baudelaire defined modernity as “the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent.” The concepts of vanguard and avant-garde become important.

2. Aesthetic modernity tries to capture the eternal in the present. This eternal does not come from tradition but lies within the present itself. By celebrating the cult of the new, modernity thus heroizes the present. It calls for rejection of all tradition. Habermas states, “Modernity revolts against the normalizing functions of tradition; modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative.” [“Modernity - An Incomplete Project”] What is sought instead is an “undefiled, immaculate and stable present.”

3. “The attitude of modernity does not treat the passing moment as sacred in order to try to maintain or perpetuate it.” [Foucault – “What is Enlightenment?”] The modern writer ceaselessly strives for the new. Perhaps Habermas best explains it:

“the distinguishing mark of works which count as modern is “the new” which will be overcome and made obsolete through the novelty of the next style... the emphatically modern document no longer borrows this power of being a classic from the authority of a past epoch; instead, a modern work becomes a classic because it has once been authentically modern.” [“Modernity - An Incomplete Project”]

4. Modernity is also characterized by intense self-consciousness. Foucault states, “This modernity does not ‘liberate man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself.”

5. Modernity blows up the continuum of history. Habermas asserts that modernity establishes a “heroic affinity of the present with the extremes of history – a sense of time wherein decadence immediately recognizes itself in the barbaric, the wild and the primitive.”