

The Emergence of Modernity; Early Modernism and Revolutionary Modernism

The term “modern,” in a historical context, is a difficult concept to tackle with certainty; meaning that it is difficult to discern a specific point in history that the “modern” world emerged and began to flourish. There are two points in the world timeline that vie for the turning point of modernity; the “early modern” period between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the “revolutionary” period of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first period is marked by the emergence of global politics and trade, while the second period contained a series of revolutions across the world that radically changed the philosophical and technological landscape of the world. While the early modern period set the stage for the emergence of the modern world as we know it, it was the revolutionary period that saw the world tip over the brink and ushered in the modern period.

The moniker “early modern” refers to the period of worldwide growth between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. The most obvious period this covers, from a Eurocentric viewpoint, is the European Renaissance. The advances in philosophy and technology in the Renaissance period mark the shift to a more modern viewpoint for many scholars; certainly, these changes laid the framework. Niccolo Machiavelli appears as one of the most prominent figures of this shift in modern scholarship, with his work *The Prince*. *The Prince* analyzes leadership and attempts to educate its audience as to the qualities that make a good leader. One of his ideas was that a good leader must be two-faced; that is, a leader must be able to help or harm depending on the circumstances the leader finds themselves in. This means that a good leader must be able to confer with the church and maintain a saintly figure while administering punishment to lawbreakers, or torture to spies. Even if the leader is not physically responsible for these acts, it is upon the leader’s head that these acts ultimately fall. European changes were not

the only shifts in philosophy that separated the early modern period from the years that came before it; changes in Asiatic trade and technology were also vital to labelling the period. In particular, the Silver Cycle that began in Manila is the first instance of a global currency: the piece-of-eight. These coins were manufactured from silver, which became far-and-away the most sought-after currency of the time – so much so that coins were often shaved or cut into for the valuable silver. And though the piece-of-eight originated in Manila, under Spanish rule, the production of silver coins was seen in Japan and China as well. Ultimately, almost all of the silver would end up in China. This means, however, that an amount of goods had to be traded out of China in order to make up the value of the silver pieces – and since China shifted from a paper-based to silver-based currency, the impact of this globalized trade is made clear.

The “revolutionary” period also saw a great deal of philosophical change. The most obvious example of this comes in the form of the various revolutions seen across the world: the American Revolution resonates most closely with many scholars not only due to location, but also because of the American Revolution’s timing historically. The French Revolution afterward showed another, darker side to revolutionary thinking – and the horror of mob mentality. The teachings of the Enlightenment thinkers – John Locke, Voltaire, Adam Smith – led to the mindsets that preceded these revolutions. In particular, these revolutions gave the people a sense of nationality. The influence of thought across oceanic as well as landlocked national lines furthered the notion of a globally connected world. And out of the breaking of colonial bonds came the Industrial Revolution; less philosophical and more technological, this revolution saw an increased focus on technology and mapping the natural world. The creation of coal powered engines and Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* stand out as prototypical examples of the kind of changes that the revolutionary modern period saw. In terms of modernity, it is around this time

that, with the rise of nationalism, the breaking of colonial bonds, and the creation of new technologies that the idea of modernity as is thought of by current historians really starts to coalesce. The mapping of the natural world and biological movement shown by early cameras and recording equipment help to replicate and standardize that movement, particularly for human beings. Standardization of movement lead to understanding not only the human body, but how to make movement efficient and clean, and it is this mindset that leads into the modern assembly line and the streamlining of creation processes. This, alongside the philosophical musing of Adam Smith in his *The Wealth of Nations*, led to a shift to capitalistic societal norms; this in the face of the advent of the Communist Manifesto and the philosophy of Anarchism, all of which persist and affect global politics and trade today.

Ultimately, the revolutionary modern period seems to have far more components of the “modern” era in it. Though the “early modern” period laid out building blocks that paved the way for the modern era, it was the revolutionary period that saw the emergence of modern philosophical and technological paradigms that persist in our world. The building blocks laid out by the Industrial Revolution have directly translated into the globalization of the modern era on a previously unseen level, and it’s for this reason that the so-called “Revolutionary Modern” period is the historic period that best describes when the modern era emerged.