22 August 2012
What is this thing you call “modern”? 

St. Nicolas Church (1844-1869) and the Brittany Tower (1976) Nantes (Loire-Atlantique)
When does France become “modern”?

1789—French Revolution

1850s—rebuilding of Paris

1930s—French population becomes more than 50% urban

1945-1973—postwar economic boom; “thirty glorious years”

J.L. David, *Death of Marat* (1793)

E. Manet, *The Balcony* (1868)

P. Picasso, *Dora Maur with Cat* (1941)

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What is this thing you call “modern”? Lecture structure

Historical periodization

Modern: political, social, cultural definitions

Modern and its suffixes (Modernism; modernization; modernity)

Modern and its prefixes (pre-modern; post-modern)

Modernity

P. Signac, *Fishing Boats* (1928)
watercolor, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Georges Fouquet, brooch
(1923) 8.75 x 3.5 inches
Metropolitan Museum
Periodization of French history

In France

Ancient history: 3000 BCE – 476 CE
Medieval history: 476-1492
“Modern” history: 1492-1789
Contemporary: 1789-present

In English-speaking context

Ancient history: 3000 BCE – 235 CE
Late antiquity: 235-800
Medieval history: 800-1455 or 1492
Early modern: 1455/1492-1789
Modern: 1789-1945
Contemporary: 1945-present
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What is Modern?

**modern politics**
structures that allow for mass participation in public life

**modern society**
industrialization and mass production
(peasantry replaced by “modern” working class)

**modern culture**
awareness of change, which seems to be speeding up, such that “all that is solid melts into air”* and nothing is left but dizzying excitement of the always new as experienced via mass consumption and mass communication

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1789 “universal” rights
1792 Convention elected
1804 plebiscite makes Bonaparte into the Emperor Napoleon
1848 universal male suffrage; slavery abolished
1946 women allowed to vote

1791 Le Chapelier Law
1800 Bank of France founded
1852 Crédit Mobilier bank
1850-1875 French railroads built
1867 collapse of Crédit Mobilier
1898 first Renault cars built

1793/4 the Year Two
1852 Bon Marché opens
1855 Paris World’s Fair
1863 Impressionist Exhibition
1889 Paris World’s Fair

* Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)
Modern and its suffixes

Modernism  modernization  modernity

Pablo Picasso,
*The Guitarist* (1910).

Gare du Nord (North Station),
Paris (built, 1861-1864; recent photo).

Eiffel Tower, Paris
(built for 1889 World’s Fair).
Modernization theory

Walt Whitman (W.W.) Rostow (1916-2003); advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson; professor at Columbia; MIT; University of Texas. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1961)

societies, like plants or animals, grow naturally, on their own; if they haven’t grown, they may be “underdeveloped,” “backward,” “stunted,” or “retarded”

societies have a “take off” period in which tradition is rejected; business and industry surge

growth happens in five distinct stages and can be measured growth happens in only one manner and one direction

criteria could include: nutrition; technology; secularism
Modernity

“By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal, the immutable…”


C. Monet, *Saint Lazare Train Station* (1877).
Modern and its prefixes

Early Modern

Portrait of Louis XIV with plans for palace at Versailles (late 1600s)

pre-modern

post-modern

When is France “modern”?

‘Modern’ is a prestigious word, a talisman, an open sesame, and it comes with a lifelong guarantee. The success of advertising slogans that use it is an indication of its status (use such-and-such a technology, have such-and-such car, etc.). But if we ask what it means, no answer is forthcoming; indeed, it is a word we are not permitted to question. When we say “modern times” or “modern technology” we think we have said something… but we have merely pointed out an inextricable confusion between fashion, the here-and-now, the ‘valid,’ the lasting, and the contemporary.

There is perpetually something new. … One of the most arrogant features of the new is that on both an emotive and an intellectual level it manages in some obscure way to give the impression of being synonymous with creativity.

ancien régime (Old Regime) and révolution

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