Name: _____ Date: _____

Modernity

by Trevor Getz

Trevor Getz is professor of history at San Francisco State University. He specializes in the history of Modern Africa. Most of his works focus on the issue of slavery and gender in West Africa. In this account, Professor Getz provides a brief overview of the concept of modernity, from its inception to now. As he notes, the concept of modernity gained a broader definition in the eighteenth-century enlightenment era.

Secondary Source:

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What does it mean to be "modern"? We all know this word, and see it used in the titles of TV shows like "Modern Family," the names of video games like "Modern Warfare," and styles of artistic production like "Modern Art." We use it to express the idea of the here and now, "modern life," although some people think we have moved past being modern, into living lives that are "post-modern."

The concept of modernity (the quality of being modern) is closely associated with the period 1750–1914 studied in this unit. We know the term "modern" was used in earlier centuries (at least as far back as 1585) to mean "existing now" or "present at this time," but it only gained the sense of describing something new in the late eighteenth century, when the word was first used to celebrate change and as the opposite of the old way of doing things. This was a time of great social, cultural, economic, and political transformations, and "modern" and "modernity" were the word used to describe the distinctive features of the new societies being built. Of course, different people used the word in unique ways, but in general it came to describe a new world that encompassed these themes:

- **Nationalism:** The nation-state with set territorial boundaries was becoming the main unit of political organization, and **secular** ideas of belonging to a nation were beginning to replace older categories of identity.

Glossary:

secular: worldy, not religious

1 I draw on several sources for this explanation, including Stuart Hall, *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, Blackwell, 1996 and David Kolb, *The Critique of Pure Modernity*, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

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Citation: Trevor Getz, "Modernity," *Passport to Social Studies* (New York: New York City Department of Education, 2018).

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- **Free-Market Economy:** The money-based economy began to drive the way that people acquired food, shelter and other goods, and in order to acquire money most people took jobs for which they were paid wages.
- **Industrialization:** The factories in which people worked began to produce modern technologies like electric lights and cars that transformed how people lived.
- **Time:** Because most people worked or went to school outside the home, their day was organized around work-shifts, school bells, and clock time.
- **Social transformation:** These changes in how people worked and lived led to a decline of traditional social orders and the rise of a new system of classes with workers at the bottom and wealthy investors and bankers at the top.
- **The modern family:** The same shifts also transformed family relations so that the nuclear family (parents and children) often became more important than the extended family, and adult men became the leaders of these nuclear families.
- **Empiricism:** New ways of evidence-driven thinking about the world, and classifying everything in it, explained all of these changes. This resulted in the development of modern sciences, but also modern racism and sexism.
- **Imperialism and migration:** These ideas began to spread rapidly around the world as new technologies allowed for vast migrations, but also helped fuel the conquest of large parts of the world by a few industrialized powers.

All of these themes celebrated something that was seen as being new, different, and (usually) better than what had existed before. Yet not all societies or individuals encountered the modern world in the same way and, in the end, many different flavors of modernity emerged around the world.

Glossary:

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Which of these themes is central to the definition of modernity? Even today, historians do not agree about what events and trends define the ideas and experiences of modernity. Some argue that the development of the Industrial Revolution, with its factories and trains, **ushered** in the modern age. These scholars often point to the inventions and discoveries of the 1790s like the Cotton Gin and Electricity as a turning point. Other scholars see the growth of a global banking system as the defining feature of modernity, and suggest that the creation of the Bank of England—the first national bank—in the 1690s was a **watershed** moment.

Glossary:

ushered: brought into being

watershed: turning point

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