What are central characteristics of modernity according to Giddens?


Giddens uses the term “modernity” as a synonym for modern society. Modern societies are, according to him, more dynamic than any social order preceding them. One of the characteristics of modern society is that it lives more in the future than in the past.

Another central feature of modernity, as Giddens describes, is that “distant events and actions have a constant effect on our lives” (p. 98). Through the international division of the labor market, economic exchanges have become more and more disconnected from local communities. Time and space are thereby combined in different ways than in premodern societies. The introduction of writing is another factor which has enabled the development of modernity. Giddens argues that modernity leads to the emergence of an information society.

Two further features which are central for modernity according to Giddens are trust and risk. The idea of risk is linked to the process of breaking away from the past and to confront an undefined future. The more a society lives in the future and shapes it actively, the more risk becomes dominant. Trust on the other hand means committing oneself across future time. Risk and trust are therefore closely related. According to Giddens, risk has become generalized in the contemporary era. This is partly due to the decreasing power of tradition. Social activities are not any more predominantly structured by what was done in the past. The more actively people take decisions about future events, the more they think in terms of risks.

This is where Giddens’ central notion of reflexivity comes into play. The more things become non-traditional, the more decisions have to be taken about them. According to Giddens, reflexivity has two meanings: one which is very general (all human beings are reflective, because one always has to think about what she/he is doing) and the other, which consists of social reflexivity, which is more specific. Social reflexivity refers to a world which is highly constituted by information, and not essentially by pre-given modes of behavior. In the modern world, individuals can’t lean on tradition in the same way as before. They are constantly forced to take decisions about how they want to act. This leads them to live in a more reflexive way, facing a more open and undetermined future.