1 INTRODUCTION: ENDS AND MEANS

Modernity, money, networks of means

Toward the middle of the nineteenth century many people agreed – not always happily – that Western Europe was giving birth to a new form of life, often called modern, in which bourgeois activities, people, attitudes, and values all played a large role. How should we understand the relations between this European modernity and the bourgeois life that was so important an element in it? The question is a thorny one for many reasons, first because what people meant by the two terms is far from clear.

"Modern" was an uncertain notion partly because it was not a new one, in use to describe present or recent times at least from the sixteenth century, and partly because the things to which it was applied differed from place to place, not least in the three large countries whose nineteenth-century transformations were most striking: England, France, and Germany. A similar uncertainty surrounded the range of phenomena designated by "bourgeois," or rather by the French term and its German and English counterparts, *bürgerlich* and middle class. The social formations called up by the three were kindred but also distinct, and each term reflected a particular historical experience. A bourgeois was originally a town-dweller, especially one who possessed some special status or privileges; a *Bürger* was a townsperson too but the German word also meant a citizen, a difference that would be of some moment in the history of both; as for "middle class," it was the least specific of the set, and unlike the others never designated a legally

defined group. The shifting and uncertain meanings of both "modern" and "bourgeois," combined with the generations of controversy that have accumulated around each, make attempting to start out with a precise definition of either a bootless task. But the links often posited between them suggest that we may be able to move toward a better understanding by considering them together.

For reasons I will come to later it was "bourgeois" rather than its cousins in other languages that gained currency as the nineteenth century went on; as it did its original reference yielded to a broader range of meanings, calling up a species of society or a form of life not limited to well-off urbanites, however prominent they remained within it. Marx was an early proponent of this usage, and he would be partly responsible for its spread, but it was already in the air when he began to develop it in the 1840s. That the regime set up following the brief revolution of July, 1830, in Paris acquired the label "Bourgeois Monarchy" encouraged people to couple the adjective to other nouns as well; in addition, the term's broadening sense owed much to the common German employment of *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* to translate the Latin phrase *societas civilis*, civil society, meaning an organized form of social life governed by laws. Marx's great predecessor G. W. F. Hegel had given the German term greater range and substance in his political lectures and writings, especially *The Philosophy of Right* elaborated in the 1820s; here *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* designated the specifically modern form of social existence in which individuals satisfy many of their needs through market exchanges, at once enjoying the opportunities and suffering from the limitations such relations entail. Hegel's *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* was not ruled by bourgeois, however. His work reflected the situation of Prussia, where he lived and taught, and where landed aristocrats long retained far better access to political authority than *Bürger*. Marx, however, convinced that the latter's needs and interests determined the form and direction of existence in the present, and taking advantage of the term's ambiguity in German, shifted its meaning toward "bourgeois society," making class power the determining element of modern social life. To him "bourgeois society" was a deeply significant but temporary historical configuration, powered by commodity exchange and wage labor, and ruled by the capitalist owners of the means of production, whose actions had the unintended effect of preparing the way for a more just and egalitarian form of life to come, grounded in worker-based socialism. This better

world would fully inherit the advances humanity owed to bourgeois efforts, however: the development of new and more powerful productive forces, the liberation of human energies, the elaboration of global interchange in every sphere, the revelation of previously hidden truths about individual and social life, and the possibility of fulfilling both material and more broadly human needs.

The residue of Marx's powerful analysis of nineteenth-century modernity, combined with the failure of his most cherished predictions, continues both to inspire and to weigh on attempts to understand the historical role of bourgeois people, activities, and values. Many features of the world we inhabit in the twenty-first century are ones he and other nineteenth-century observers rightly associated with bourgeois doings and aspirations: the urbanization and globalization of life, the ascendancy of market relations, the opening of new paths and opportunities for individuals, the expansion of education, the extension of political rights; all of them, now as then, combined with a litany of associated discontents, chief among them persisting social inequality. When we look back on the ways this world has come about, however, we find much that Marx and many of his contemporaries did not grasp or foresee.

First, historical research in the past half-century has cast much doubt on earlier convictions about the political role once assigned to bourgeois people as a class. Individual bourgeois exercised certain kinds of power to be sure (as they still do), but attempts to identify particular regimes with some generalized middle-class interest separate from others have become increasingly difficult to maintain, and the governments that did most to foster economic advance, expand education, and secure property rights often had a markedly non-bourgeois character. Formerly it was common even for non-Marxists to regard the great French Revolution that began in 1789 as in some way the work of the bourgeoisie. A well-known French book bore the title *Les Bourgeois conquerants*, "the conquering bourgeois"; the textbook most widely used in European history courses in the United States in the 1950s (when this writer first studied the subject) confidently summed up the results of reforms and regime changes in the early 1830s as "The Triumph of the West-European Bourgeoisie." These certainties are much diminished now. Writers have emphasized that the Revolution of 1789 took place in a country whose economy was still largely untouched by modern industry and remained in many ways

closer to what it had been in 1650 than to what it would be in 1914, that many bourgeois were among the privileged groups the Revolution displaced ("pillars of the regime," as Pierre Goubert put it, and – with exceptions – quite "at home inside it"), and that the Revolution probably did as much to retard French economic development as to further it. Even at the next revolution in 1830 the country's economic life still went on almost wholly inside structures already in place a century earlier. The main bourgeois supporters of the government set up then were bankers, financiers, office holders, and landowners much like those who had flourished in a cozy relationship to the old monarchy, and recent historians have offered good reasons to understand the regime as one dominated by what people in the time called "notables" (a term to which I will return below) rather than bourgeois. Restrictive electoral laws denied many (even most) merchants, manufacturers, and professionals the right to vote or hold office, and some among them were important contributors to the opposition and agitation that helped produce the return of revolution in 1848, out of which emerged not a more broadly bourgeois government but the authoritarian Bonapartist Second Empire. During its two decades of life the Empire fostered railroad building, urban reconstruction, and industrial investment, but bourgeois groups often opposed these measures, fearful that their own vested interests would be damaged or that the state would gain too much power.[1]

Were political revolution a response to the needs of a developing modern bourgeoisie, then it "should" have occurred in England, the most highly developed commercial society and first home of machine industry, rather than in France; none ever did. The putative British counterpart to the establishment of the French "Bourgeois Monarchy," the Reform Bill of 1832 that extended suffrage to many middle-class men in the ballooning northern industrial cities, was largely arranged and managed by Whig grandees, and it shored up the ground on which aristocratic dominance in British politics persisted through most of the nineteenth century. Save for the few months following March, 1848, no German territorial state before 1918 enjoyed (or suffered) a government that can persuasively be said to have been put in place or managed by people from the *Bürgertum* (to be sure independent cities were still controlled by their burgher inhabitants, although they had less autonomy than during the Middle Ages, middle-class influence was greater in some regions – notably the southwest – than in others, and between

1860 and 1873 Austria was in part an exception, shaken up by a series of military defeats). The regime that oversaw the most powerful wave of German economic expansion and provided the legal framework for a modern civil society was the Bismarckian *Reich* that crumbled in World War I. It had been established by force of arms and as part of the Prussian minister's campaign to defeat liberal *Bürger* politicians between 1862 and 1871, and it gave much support to aristocratic *Junker* interests and values, particularly after 1878, when Bismarck jettisoned the policies that had partially reconciled him with liberals in the new state's first years. Later on I will give reasons for rejecting claims by certain historians that, all the same, the Bismarckian regime should be seen as a kind of substitute bourgeois revolution.

In all three countries the importance of such older and non-bourgeois forces eventually receded, but in situations that simultaneously fostered the growth of working-class and peasant political influence; as before, what power middle-class people could command depended on compromise with individuals and groups who bore other social identities. Those who persist in attributing effective hegemony over European politics during the nineteenth century to the bourgeoisie often do so by assuming, explicitly or implicitly, what they need to prove, namely that political power must always be the power of some distinct social class: since the long-assumed preeminence of aristocrats was being called into question, and since workers and peasants clearly did not rule, the bourgeoisie must have been at the helm. Logicians call this kind of fallacious reasoning *petitio principi*, injecting an assumed conclusion into the terms that formulate a question.[2]

Moreover, the bourgeoisie Marx and others sought to identify toward the middle of the nineteenth century subsequently lost many of its distinguishing features. Over time many and perhaps most middle-class people have moved toward ways of dressing, speaking, and interacting, and toward attitudes and beliefs in morality, politics, gender relations, and culture that contrast with the ones that marked their predecessors as recognizably bourgeois. All through the nineteenth century the staid, careful, formal behavior displayed by some bourgeois groups, intent on maintaining separate roles for men and women and fearful of moral deviations, was challenged by people no less middle-class than the others. By the time of World War I (and especially in the years just after it) signs were already widespread that "Victorian" attitudes and mores were on the way to being replaced by

the more informal and open style of self-presentation and interaction, the more candid discussion of once-veiled topics, and the altered relations between the middle classes and various forms of culture, that would transform social life from the 1960s.

These observations can be summed up in a few sentences. First, modernity has some of its essential roots in the efforts and activities of a category of people we call bourgeois, but these developments have taken place under political regimes in which bourgeois power was at best sporadic and limited; only at passing moments was anything it makes sense to call the bourgeois class dominant in society and politics. Second, bourgeois were exemplary contributors to making the world modern but so were people with contrary social identities, some of whom acted as opponents of bourgeois power and interests and in the face of resistance from middle-class individuals and groups. And third, as the form of life we call modern has evolved and unfolded, the bourgeois people who contributed to it have increasingly adopted behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that contrast with those that once seemed to define them. We need a perspective that can put all the parts of this picture into a comprehensible relationship with each other.

In what follows I seek to develop such a perspective by considering the relationship between modernity and the range of phenomena to which we attach the adjective "bourgeois" not in terms of the rise of a class, but as the emergence and elaboration of a certain "form of life." Ludwig Wittgenstein used this term (in German, *Lebensform*) to refer to a complex of social and cultural practices that develop inside some set of practical and productive activities (one example was a construction site and the people who work and interact on it), a sense broader than what the French sociologist Edmond Goblot was probably the first to call a "style of life," made up of everyday features of behavior and interaction such as dress, language, forms of politeness, and domestic arrangements. I take the term in Wittgenstein's broader sense, but the content I give it owes most to the sociologist Georg Simmel, especially his inquiries (pursued in the years around 1900) into what he called *The Philosophy of Money*. Simmel sought to grasp the significance of money as a social phenomenon, to comprehend what the predominance of money in social relations tells about human beings, and to elucidate the kinds of relations between people, things, values, and cultural practices that become

paramount in a society in which connections and interactions based on money are widely diffused.

Simmel called money a "social tool," meaning that it gives people power to extend and multiply the capacities they can bring to bear in pursuing their goals or ends. It does this by providing a medium with which to compare, exchange, and combine disparate goods (in the broadest sense), often far removed from each other, and thus to establish long chains of connection through which individuals can gather together objects, resources, assets, or energies, and concentrate them at a given point. Although money is the paradigmatic instance of such a means or instrument, Simmel also regarded other social institutions as tools in this same sense, including bureaucracies, armies, legal systems, academies, and scientific societies. All of them, he observed, "become the junction of countless individual teleological sequences and provide an efficient tool for otherwise unattainable purposes"; they create or extend "chains of purposive action." An individual who is able to employ and in some degree direct any one of such instruments "possesses a collectively established tool that multiples his own powers, extends their effectiveness and secures their ends." However diverse the "content" such tools support, that is the goals or purposes people pursue through them, they resemble each other in what Simmel called their "form," their common ability to assemble and make available diffused and distant resources and assets, generating powers people would not otherwise possess. A society in which many individuals are able to call upon such tools, and through them collect and focus social resources, will possess capacities not available, and characteristics not developed, where such practices are absent or limited; when they are present many aspects of life will be shaped and colored by them. *The Philosophy of Money* is really a book about what life and social relations in such societies are like.[3]

I think considerable light can be cast on the relations between modernity and bourgeois life by thinking about both in terms of the forms and histories of such tools or implements. In order to do so we need a term that allows us to describe and specify their features more clearly (and resolve a certain confusion in Simmel's usage, to which I will come in a moment). I propose to call them "networks of means." A network of means is a chain or web of people and instruments that links distant energies and resources to each other, allowing individuals and groups to draw them together, create synergies between them, and

employ the capacity they generate for some particular purpose or goal. Networks of means generate social power both for society as a whole, and for particular individuals and groupings within it. To society at large they impart an ability to accomplish otherwise unattainable things. But the power thus released flows differentially to particular individuals and groups, altering the relations among them.

It seems reasonable to distinguish three species of such networks on a large scale: 1. markets; 2. states and other administrative structures; and 3. webs of information and communication. The place of each in the development of modernity has often been recognized, but considering them all as networks of means puts their relationship in a different light. Despite the ways they differ from each other, and which will demand our attention soon enough, all are structures through which scattered people, objects, and implements can be linked together by way of "chains of purposive action," allowing the diverse elements of social power to be exchanged and gathered at some chosen point. Markets do this by tying together ways of collecting materials or resources, ways of turning them into useful or valuable commodities, and ways of exchanging and distributing the products. Modern states are complex linkages of agencies for gathering (as well as expanding) a population's assets or resources, deciding about the uses to which they should be put, and then directing them toward these ends. Networks of communication allow information, knowledge, or skills based on them to be transmitted from place to place, making them available to people who would otherwise not have access to them. Sometimes they do this by diffusing physical objects, such as newspapers or books, and sometimes simply by spreading data, for instance in the form of travelers' reports or radio broadcasts. The relations into which people are drawn by states are often more geographically limited than are markets or communicative networks, reminding us that not all distant ties involve people and resources equally remote from each other, but states have often appeared and still appear to many as foreign to everyday local experience; as a result they exemplify very well the ability of extended connections to generate social power, benefitting those who are able to share in it and threatening or hindering those who are not.

The three large-scale networks are all made up of a wide range of smaller and more contained ones. Present-day examples of these more specific formations include corporations, political parties,

and professional or scientific societies. One example of such a smaller structure that was important in the emergence of modern society, and modern bourgeois life, is the putting-out system (sometimes called "proto-industry") that linked together scattered workers (most often in textiles) and their implements of work under the direction of merchants who (sometimes owning the tools, sometimes not) distributed and collected materials, providing opportunities for part-time employment and selling the products in some market. A second instance, not usually linked to the first, is what early modern people called the Republic of Letters, which bound writers and thinkers to each other and to publishers, periodicals, academies, and libraries, giving its members access to both resources and audiences not otherwise at hand.

Thinking simultaneously about these two early networks helps to point up the common features imparted to such connections by their form, despite their different kinds of content. First, such linkages allow scattered productive resources and implements to be joined together or aggregated, effecting over long distances what large-scale farms, cities, and (later) factories do inside more limited and defined spaces; by bringing people and the materials they employ effectively closer, such chains of connection generate powers to produce objects and to call up and direct energies to which more isolated individuals and groups have no access. Second, by spreading knowledge about materials available and conditions obtaining in one place to others, they enhance possibilities for comparison, competition, and improvement. Third, by providing access to materials not available locally and opportunities to engage in activities oriented toward a wider public (whether for books or thread or cloth) they offer rewards to those willing to make use of otherwise idle stretches of time, allowing for the realization of undeveloped productive potentials and offering satisfactions both material and personal that would not be available inside strictly local contexts. And fourth, they allow individuals to enter into relations with others at a distance, ties that supplement and in some degree supplant their connections with close-by people who may have greater immediate power to direct their lives. To be sure, each of these effects could be described in different and more negative terms; living and acting through extended and distant relationships brings losses as well as gains, and we will have occasion to recognize their harms as well as benefits.

The idea of a network has a certain easy appeal in the age of the Internet, when media of all kinds are viewed as being at the center of life.[4] The connection between the notion of "networks of means" and these often-observed phenomena and images needs to be acknowledged, and it will prove to be neither irrelevant nor trivial. Most of the effects of networks listed just above can be seen in the World Wide Web no less than in the putting-out system or the Republic of Letters. But the current popularity of the idea of networks requires that we distinguish the species of them being considered here from some others. The first of these are the tissues of family, kinship, friendship, and patronage to which anthropologists, sociologists, and historians all give attention. Neighborhoods or villages were the first homes of such social networks, but they have been set up in larger settings such as cities or corporations too. Some of the work that centers on these networks can offer us important methodological guidance (as I will suggest briefly later in this chapter), but in contrast to networks of means, these are personal networks, established directly between individuals or families. By contrast, the connections people establish in and through networks of means have a more impersonal quality, imparted by the role that objects, whether books or tools or raw materials and products, play in them, as the examples of the putting-out system and the Republic of Letters already suggest. Ties of kinship or patronage may become part of these more complex kinds of chains, or support people's ability to connect to them, but the resources to which such ties in and by themselves give access are much more limited. In addition, as I will try to explain in a moment, they are differently mediated, so that they do not constitute such networks by themselves. Understanding the ways connections are established and mediated within networks of means will also provide us with a basis for distinguishing them from the kinds of structures posited by advocates of action network theory, about which I will have a word to say later.

By recognizing that the frames networks of means provide to support human interactions at a distance bring similar advantages despite the different ends to which they contribute, we adopt Simmel's view that the "form" of human interactions can be no less important than their content. Physical labor and its products, resources managed through administrative structures, and knowledge and skill communicated from one social location to another, are all instances of the realized human potential that networks of means stimulate or amplify.