

# Dilemma of Modernisation: A Possible Future of 'Human Enshittification'

Fango Mary Waii

Ph. D Scholar, History, Rajiv Gandhi University

## Abstract

This article begins by questioning whether we are truly progressing as promised by the concept of modernisation. Or are we simply transitioning into an era of human marionettes in the age of information and technological advancement? The scholar argues that the idea of modernisation in the way it is currently understood is leading to the creation of global conditions and an environment where too much emphasis on relentless advancement in technology, often at the expense of effective regulation and consideration of human consequences, will ultimately lead to the emergence of the world that will be devoid of inclusive progress where modernization will be the mere means of further enrichment of already affluent social elites especially that of the tech giants and their political allies in the governing system. But the worst of all consequences will be reflected in the slow human decadence in terms of their creative, critical, and productive capabilities. This essay primarily explores the human consequences of living in an era dominated by hyper-information and algorithms. The scholar introduces the term 'human enshittification'<sup>1</sup> to describe the decline in human potential, particularly among young adults.

**Keywords:** Modernisation, progress, human enshittification, brain rot, doom scrolling

## INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Dictionary defines the term historicity as a noun that describes 'the quality or state of being historical or related to history', contrary to myths or legends. It describes its origin from the adjective 'historic' with the suffix 'ity'. Both terms, in return, are related to the concept of historicism in history propounded in the early nineteenth century by German philosopher Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel in his work *The Philosophy of History*, written in two volumes over the years. However, the concept of historicism was popularised later through the historiographical works of Leopold Von Ranke, Wilhelm Von Humboldt, Johann Gustav Droysen and Jacob Burckhardt (Leite, 2023). Accordingly, historicism came to define this idea and understanding of the world where the nature and essence of everything lie in its history (Leite, 2023). In other words, every existence in the present is the outcome of its past. Therefore, it is the past, through the baptism of time, that defines, describes and explains the nature of things in the present.

However, the history of the term historicism, true to the idea it encapsulates, was far from linear. Over time, several variants of the term historicism emerged, each grounded in the writings of different historians; one such variant was what later came to be known as Hegel's understanding of history. German philosopher and historian G.W.F. Hegel, contemporary with Schlegel, was the first to outline and elaborate the term historicism as a philosophical or metaphysical concept (Leite, 2023) and one deeply embedded in the unfolding of history. Hegel, in his work *Introduction to Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*,

argues that there are three types of history, based on how historians approach it (William, 2020). The first is original history, where a historian seeks to give a firsthand ‘account of events, actions and situations, collected or verified by the historian himself’ (William, 2020, p. 20). In this case, the historian, whilst recording the history, is part of it, since there is no separation between the occurrence of events or actions and the historian, and because every individual, including historians, carries within herself/himself what Hegel calls ‘the spirit of the age’ in which she/he lives (William, 2020, p. 20). The second is reflective history, which he further divides into universal, practical, critical and specialised history. What separates reflective history from original history is the absence of a particular timeframe and the transcendence of the contemporary culture in which the historian lives. Here, the work of the historian centres on narrating the history or historical events of a past culture, period or country (William, 2020). The third and last type of history is what he describes as philosophical history. In this history, one he practised in several of his works, the concept of historicism was elaborated to its philosophical essence. According to Hegel, history will ultimately reach its conclusion with the complete realisation of the ‘world spirit through the historical process’ (William, 2020, pp. 20-21). This realisation will be reflected in the growing complexities of human society, which will be founded on self-consciousness, freedom, reason, and harmony. In other words, it is through the course of history that humanity will eventually reach a kind of ‘utopian’ stage of civilisation. This stage has been the ultimate goal of history all along, as it is through history that the ‘divine spirit’ of the world reveals itself, guided by the principle of reason (William, 2020). Since historicism is a concept of history that emphasises the role of history in understanding the nature or essence of things in their present form, historicism, by default, narrates the chronological progression of the self-actualisation of the spirit in the history of these things. Here, the ‘things’ can be anything – from universal history to social to cultural history, or aspects of human civilisation. In fact, Hegel argues that universal history itself can be understood as a ‘divine spirit’ or ‘Geist’ working or manifesting itself. Thus, we can argue that what Hegel presents is a ‘highly progressive view of history, perceiving the development of human society as a dynamic process by which our rational faculties become ever more refined and cultivated’ (William, 2020, p. 21). In the twentieth century, one of the most excellent defences of Hegel's philosophy of history was reflected and embodied in the 1992 work of Francis Fukuyama called *The End of History And The Last Man*. Fukuyama, as a political scientist, however, visualised Hegel's idea of the ultimate ‘end’ of history in terms of the end of a ‘dialectical ideological conflict’ and the establishment of a ‘single universal ideology’ – which, in this case, was the victory of western liberalism over the communist regime of the east (William, 2020, p. 22). Thus, establishing a condition for human society to increasingly move towards the freedom that Hegel described as the ultimate manifestation of the ‘World Spirit’.

The question we must ask ourselves is whether we are truly progressing based on the principle of reason. Is human society becoming increasingly rational and culturally refined? Can we equate modernisation with genuine progress? Does freedom or liberalisation always lead to a more advanced and improved civilisation? In simpler terms, where do we stand in the twenty – first century as a civilisation, especially considering our promises, dreams, and aspirations to do better and be better than we were in the previous century? To explore these questions, we need to start by asking what modernisation means.

### **A Politics of Concepts: Modernisation and Progress**

To understand what modernisation means, we need to understand what distinguishes it from the so-called traditional. According to Samuel P. Huntington (1971, p. 286), an American political scientist, the essential

difference between traditional and modern lies in the ‘greater control which modern man has over his natural and social environment’ based on the advancement and expansion of scientific and technological knowledge. In other words, modern, by its very definition and in contrast to traditional, signifies something better, more efficient, and superior to that of the past order. Thus, historian Cyril Black (1966, as cited in Huntington, 1971, p. 286) defines modern society as something that emerges out of the adaptation of ‘Historically evolved institutions... that reflect the unprecedented increase in Man’s knowledge.’ But because every society or culture, in general, begins from the initial state of being traditional, the process that bridges the gap between these two states of tradition and modernity is what Huntington (1971, p. 288) describes as the ‘grand process of modernisation’. In other words, modernisation is the process that results in the establishment of a modern society. Huntington (1971) further argues that there are, generally speaking, nine important characteristics of the process of modernisation, which are, more or less, unanimously agreed upon by theorists and scholars alike. These are the characteristics of modernisation as a revolutionary, complex, systematic, global, lengthy, phased, homogenising, irreversible and progressive process.

For our purpose, we are going to focus only on the last and the ninth characteristics of the process of modernisation, i.e., modernisation as a progressive process. Huntington (1971) elaborates that what makes modernisation progressive is the ultimate destination and intent of the process itself, which he argues will result in the accomplishment of a better social, political and economic order, leading to the enhancement of human society, culturally and materially speaking, in the long run. Thus, modernisation is not only ‘inevitable, [but] it is also desirable’ (Huntington, 1971, p. 290).

Based on this understanding of modernisation, can we here conclude that because modernisation eventually leads to a progressive state of human society, modernisation can, therefore, be equated with the concept of progress? Perhaps it can be. However, a problem regarding this view arises when we look into the history of progress. Progress, the way we understand it today, has not always been the case. Different periods in history had different understandings of the term. According to political scientist Sheldon S. Wolin, in the early eighteenth century, when progress was politically associated with the ideologies of the left or liberal intellectuals it was often used as a ‘shorthand ... for a broad aspiration for social change guided... and based’ upon advancement of the scientific knowledge and rationalism as opposed to the contemporary practices of social hierarchies and inherited privileges by birth which they argued were based on the interest and caprice of the upper echelons of the period (Wolin, 1983, pp. 9-12). And because progress, inherently expressing within itself a certain vision and condition of societal change during this period, was associated with the accumulation of scientific knowledge and scientific advancement, the progress towards this direction linked it with modernisation. In other words, it was the process of attaining the ideals of progress through scientific advancement that led to the emergence of modernisation and, hence, the modernisation of the culture and society at large. However, this idea of progress in association with modernisation as an inherently positive force was shattered in the later parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when consequent economic growth and change in political structure did not necessarily lead to the establishment of conditions that liberals associated with the term progress and, by default, to that of a process of modernisation. These conditions included reduced social, economic, and political inequalities, a government that upheld the rule of law, in contrast to the arbitrary powers of monarchies and dictatorial authorities, and a society that encouraged free thinking and greater individual freedoms. Contrary to these expectations, liberals were now confronted with new types of problems associated with the ‘modern world’ which included ‘deteriorating cities, thickening pollution, increased

racial tensions, widening social inequalities' (Wolin, 1983, p. 13) and in the twenty-first century, climate change.

This was because, Wolin (1983) argues, in the process of associating progress with the scientific revolution, it was also appropriated by modern capitalism and modern capitalist elites who were, unfortunately, already exercising a significant level of influence in channeling these forces through policies and laws. After all, they were either part of the governing authorities themselves or had prominent lobbies in them, thereby masking and leaving as unproblematic the untamed extent and direction of the scientific revolutions, primarily dictated by the insatiable demands of capitalism rather than the progressive needs of the inclusive society at large (Wolin, 1983, p. 13). Thus, this was also the period when the concept of progress increasingly became the political act of conservatives in their criticism of the liberals for being 'static' and in their role in stalling future progress, especially economic growth, by criticising the dynamics of modernisation (Wolin, 1983). Therefore, by this period, we start to see the beginning of the tension between progress and modernisation. This period also started witnessing the emerging discourse of whether the relationship between modernisation and progress can always be without problems, whether modernisation as a self-perpetuating process of advancement does not require any critical human intervention and, most importantly, does modernisation always mean better. The answer to these questions in the second half of the twentieth century was reflected in the international discourse of 'sustainable development', which, in the 1978 Brundtland Report, was defined as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same by peacefully sustaining their livelihood (Emas, 2015). In India, this newfound relationship between modernisation and progress within the framework of sustainability and inclusivity can be seen in the present government's long-term project of Viksit Bharat 2047. As to the latter question, few isolated engagements of scholars are reflected in the work of Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, who in his 2011 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, made a case for the progress, as one can already gauge from the title of his book. In one of his interviews with 'The Harvard Gazette', he corroborates his argument with the 'fact' that not only wars and conflicts between nations have declined, but also 'Extreme poverty has been decimated' (Walsh, 2018).

If we conclude from the above discussion that modernisation is evolving alongside a changing concept of progress— or at least that concrete steps are being taken to reduce the growing gap between the two— where did it go wrong? To this, the scholar argues that human consequences of modernisation in terms of physical and cerebral engagement have been profoundly underplayed while exaggerating the material aspect of human gains. This is the instance of while human life expectancy and standard of living have increased significantly in recent decades, the quality of life itself has deteriorated. This decline is evident in the growing levels of pollution, climate change, and the nature of social relationships, which have been affected by the dominance of social media engagement. Additionally, the quality of intellectual discourse has suffered due to how information spreads in today's technology-driven society, particularly through social networking sites and artificial intelligence. Most individuals now have the means and access to create and disseminate their version of the narratives, but the platforms that facilitate this dissemination are largely controlled by a select few elite individuals, rendering a certain tempered, constructed and biased nature to modern intellectual discourse in everyday life – both online and offline. To corroborate this argument, in this paper, the scholar will mainly focus on the effects of social media among young adults and adults in terms of both mental and physical health.

### **A possible future towards ‘human enshittification’**

In 2024, ‘brain rot’ was chosen as the Oxford word of the year. It is described as a deterioration of a person’s critical thinking capacities, affecting their mental state in the long run, as a result of overconsumption of low-quality or ‘unchallenging’ online content. Although the type of content described as ‘low-quality’ was not particularly defined or delineated, among netizens, it increasingly came to denote the types of content that require less attention span and not necessarily working the mental aspect of being, but rather as a passive consumer of a staged act or AI (Artificial Intelligence) generated content. On the official page of Oxford University Press (2024), the reason for its selection was highlighted as owing to the increasing use of the word among Gen Z and Gen Alpha, i.e., increased by 230 per cent between 2023 and 2024, and also because of the telling nature of its uses about modern society, with the decreasing blurriness between the internet culture and society at large. Other words that have come forward in the last few years are ‘doom-scrolling’ – which, according to the Cambridge dictionary, means an act of spending an increasing amount of time looking at one’s phone or computer screen, consuming online content without any critical or active participation; ‘slop’ – which is defined by the Oxford dictionary as any ‘Art, writing, or other content generated using artificial intelligence’ with a peculiar characteristics of being a ‘low quality inauthentic, or inaccurate’; and, somehow localised to Indian lexicon, ‘WhatsApp university’, denoting to the concerning increasing trend of spreading of misinformation especially that of volatile nature in the social media platform of WhatsApp, menacing in the way in which such information spreads controllably through the forward feature of the App and viral moment in other social media platforms.

As mentioned above, the inclusion of new vocabulary into our everyday language reveals much more about our contemporary society than we might initially realise. These words reflect the realities of our lives that we are also trying to articulate and understand verbally. In turn, when we try to understand something verbally, we are also subconsciously trying to construct a concept that has both obvious and ambiguous ideas attached to it. More often than not, it is the intuitive feeling of the existence of a certain phenomenon that leads to the creation of new words or even the revival of old words with the new ideas associated with them. Hence, words define concepts and ideas, and those concepts are associated with the concrete and nebulous aspects of our reality, or vice versa. In this case, these words express a concerning view of our contemporary society and are associated with the concerning future of the coming generation. Some of the contemporary research done on the effects of increasing social media use, especially among young adults and adults, puts these words into their physical and cerebral manifestations. In one such study, an increasing relationship between addiction to social media use and deteriorating abilities in critical thinking was established. This was because the increasing use of social media, where contents are often encapsulated or constructed in summaries and short video format, reduces the ability of a person to engage in activities that require a lot of patience and attention span to critically engage with matters that require a significant amount of cerebral activities. (Ozpence, 2024). Primary among them is the task of an academic nature. This reduction in attention span and patience is often the result of addiction to high-speed and immediate dopamine associated with such social media content, where everything is designed, in terms of algorithms and ‘influencer’ sponsorships, to forever gain the interest of potential users and their active engagement in the future. In another study, a corollary consequence of such addiction was established with the increasing impairment of ‘executive control’, mainly associated with the prefrontal area of our brain. According to this study, this was because a high consumption of online content primarily engages the ‘lower-order cortical’ region of the human brain, which is primarily associated with the

processing of emotions, owing to the less cerebral nature of online content, which requires less psychological effort. In other words, whilst the prolonged consumption of online content continues to engage the lower-order cortical regions of the human brain, the activities in the higher-order areas responsible for ‘self-control and attention’ are suppressed, which, with increasing time, begins to affect the efficiency of this functional execution (Yan et al., 2024).

But even if one remains, if one supposedly does which would be a very rare case, outside the ambit of social media uses the emergence of new AI technologies such as ChatGPT of Open AI, Gemini of Google and the recent Chinese variant of AI assistance called DeepSeek that purposes to do the ‘hard work’ for you i.e., to engage with your material, more often than not such as academic readings and materials and fact-finding for research purposes, endangers today’s youth, especially those who are pursuing an academic-related career or are planning to do so, to normalised such easy access without putting much deliberate effort into it. Besides this, there are already many emerging debates relating to the ethical concerns of such AI uses in academics, relating to the violation of plagiarism and copyright rules and laws, respectively.

## Conclusion

E. H. Carr, in his criticism towards an idea of an ‘end of history’, encapsulated in the concept and practice of historicism, argued that whilst the very idea of history practised by the historians and the philosopher of historicism could be questioned, the idea of the progressive nature of history is not entirely false. However, this progress is not the outward or the final manifestation of Hegel’s ‘spirit of the world’, but rather is a direct result of the passing of knowledge from the generation gone to the contemporary generation and so forth – knowledge in terms of better technologies, advancement in sciences and humanitarian ideas and concepts in association with it. However, when Carr was presenting this argument, he was speaking of an ideal world, where authorities in control of the process and phenomenon impacting would be responsible with its power. But what happens when this power of knowledge is channelled in the direction of profiteering, whilst a significant portion of the thinking adult is merely an object to its market strategy?

Today we live in a generation where every piece of information we see, hear, or participate in – whether offline or online – is the outcome of constructed and deliberately managed echo chambers of Hi-tech giants, advertising moguls, governing authorities and their popular followers in the realm of social media. Where the constant advertisement of the importance of being ‘connected’ through social media and normalising its addiction through self-effacing jokes and parody or memes, in social media languages, among young adults has real-time consequences.

In presenting this argument, however, the scholar is aware of the limitations of presenting the young adults and adults, comprising a significant portion of the social media users, as passive victims without an active agency towards the problems or consequences themselves. This argument is also not aimed at vilifying overall advancements in technology. Instead, the goal here was to emphasise our engagement with forces such as modernisation and progress, and to critically evaluate their darker consequences. By doing so, we can formulate better solutions in terms of policies, regulations, and public engagement. Whilst the involvement of both public authorities and private stakeholders in these regulatory discussions has its limitations, we must begin somewhere and with someone, without disguising the solutions as a topic of discussion of an elite few or of academic circles, but as a grassroots social awareness programme.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Enshittification’ is a neologism coined by writer Cory Doctorow in 2022, referring to the phenomenon of deteriorating conditions on online platforms and products over time. In this article, the term is combined with ‘human’ to emphasise the shift in human potential in the technologically dominated modern world.

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