Few words are as potent as the two I have paired in the title to this essay. Yoked together, they're explosive, a tinderbox and a match.

And yet the first word calls out for the second. One of the characteristics of modernity (by which I mean "how we live now") is the sense that space is not what it used to be. Less and less is distance an obstacle to overcome. It is easy for us to venture out into the world: we get on a plane and fly away, or we log into Facebook and visit our far-flung friends without leaving home. And it is easy for the world to come to us: movies, music, and news all come to our laptops and smartphones, and tourists (and refugees) get on a plane and fly to our cities. They arrive at our doorsteps, and we arrive at theirs, virtually and in the flesh. We—and they—arrive under different conditions, to be sure, but we arrive nonetheless. As our contact with others increases, we must find ways to open our doors and say to the stranger, "Welcome."

Or not. If one party refuses to extend hospitality, or the other refuses to accept it, the match might hit the tinderbox. As the politics of xenophobia take hold in Europe and North America, examples of this scenario are not hard to find. People are afraid of the barbarians at the gates. They worry about threats to their safety and way of life. They are like the characters in "The Fall of the City," a radio drama written in verse from 1937, who are warned of a coming conqueror, "This one is dangerous! / Word has out-oared him. / East over sea-cross has / All taken . . . / Every country. / No men are free there" (MacLeish). The "conqueror" people fear now is the foreign worker who takes their job or the lone-wolf terrorist who strikes without warning. Better yet, it is the trade agreement that sends their jobs abroad (or lets the foreign worker into the country) or the ideology that inspires the terrorist. Since space is not what it used to be, what had been a distant threat is distant no longer.

What, then, do we make of modern hospitality? We must first ask what we mean when we talk about modernity. Two narratives, one dominant, the other al-

ternative, provide competing definitions, but the alternative narrative is more responsive to questions of how we live now. It shows how each of these four words reveals something about modernity's constitutive contradictions—the relationships we carry on with others as we move through an open-ended world. We must also ask why the tinderbox is so dry. What is the source of the anxiety that has given rise to the nativism in Europe and North America? Finally, we must ask how ideas of hospitality (and a willingness to be vulnerable) can help us break the cycle of fear that feeds it.

Modern Anxiety

The question "What is modernity?" has been an Ariadne's thread in the social sciences and humanities for at least seventy-five years, so my four-word answer—"how we live now"—might seem rather glib. But each word hides as much as it reveals. Let us pry them open to disclose their underlying ambivalence and complexity, which are key to understanding the anxiety that is a defining trait of our modern world.

How

It is tempting to think that what makes us modern are the tools we use. We see progress in new technologies that let us do things more quickly, easily, or efficiently. Consider communication, to name a prominent example. The printing press made it possible to reproduce books without employing scribes. The telegraph, and later the telephone, made it possible to send messages without physically transporting them, and radio made it possible to send them even without laying copper wire. Television and the Internet continued the trend, and now, for fifty or a hundred dollars a month, our smartphones give us access to vast libraries of information. With each new technology the link between content and producer becomes more abstract, to the point now where content appears completely unmoored.

But modernity is defined not by things but the relationships they engender. That is, it is not our tools that make us modern, but how they have changed the ways we relate to each other—not what we have, but how we live. As technologies have loosened their grip on content, the world we navigate

through has grown. It is bigger now than twenty years ago (when web browsers had not yet made the Internet widely accessible), or sixty years ago (when television news was just beginning to bring us images of faraway places), or one hundred years ago (when transatlantic radio transmissions were still a relative novelty). Our world is also bigger because travel is easier. The trends there are similar to those in communication: flying is routine, at least for those with the means to do so. Thus we enter into and maintain relationships with more people at greater distances in ways we could not have before. Some relationships are meaningful, some are not; some are friendly, some are not.

Therein lies one source of anxiety: our contact with alterity is constantly growing. We are constantly confronted with the strangeness of the world, which often appears threatening because it is unknown.

We

When I say "we," whom do I mean exactly? I am writing about Europe and North America because the events that concern me have taken place there, and be-cause I am North American. Perhaps I am writing about the West. But what exactly does that term mean?

"The West" has many different meanings, but they tend to be rooted in geography and history. We use the term to designate a certain intellectual heritage, that of the Greeks filtered through the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which gave us ideas of politics and democracy that still have purchase today. The dominant narrative of the West relies on a notion of modernity that is characterized by "the growth of reason, defined in various ways: for example, as the growth of scientific consciousness, or the development of a secular outlook, or the rise of instrumental rationality, or an ever-clearer distinction between fact-finding and evaluation" (Taylor 154). The forces of modernity, in this view, are universal and not a function of culture.

In fact, this view masks its own ethnocentrism and distorts what we see of others. It obscures the different ways people live now, and, as a result, it misses the fact that "a Japanese modernity, an Indian modernity, and various modulations of Islamic modernity

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[have entered] alongside the gamut of Western societies, which are also far from being uniform" (Taylor 163). It also obscures the unevenness of modernity within our own communities, which is manifest, among other places, in disparities in wealth from one place to the next and the resulting gaps in people's access to resources.

An alternative narrative of modernity results from observing this unevenness and in light of which labels such as "the West" appear inadequate. Other labels pose similar problems. The media, for instance, bring us foreign ideas, while highways and airports bring us foreign people, but as we incorporate them into our lives (and as we venture out of our own communities), they begin to appear less, well, *foreign*. We discover that what we call the West has porous borders and that it is, in a word, hybrid. "The West" becomes a shorthand that, despite its usefulness in designating an intellectual tradition, is ultimately misleading. We should use it with caution: "the real problem is not hybridity—which is common throughout history—but boundaries and the social proclivity to boundary fetishism. Hybridity is

unremarkable and is noteworthy only from the point of view of boundaries that have been essentialized" (Nederveen Pieterse 220).

Live

How do we move through the modern world? One answer comes from seeing how changes such as those I describe above contribute to and are symptomatic of a larger trend toward abstraction.

Increasingly, we must put our trust in what Anthony Giddens calls "expert systems" (or "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today") that are too complex for us to grasp in any easy way (27). They are designed, for instance, to ensure people are competent in their jobs so we can be confident in their work even if we lack the expertise to evaluate it. Consider the trust we put in doctors. I don't have the expertise to decide whether my doctor is a quack, but I know she has earned a degree from an accredited institution, and I trust the accrediting agency, if nothing else. What other choice do I have? I trust it, and everything works out fine. Be-

sides, if everyone needed medical training to have confidence in their doctor, society would grind to a halt.

But expert systems are growing more complex. In the past, we knew there was eventually a backstop—some sort of guarantee based on real-world expertise—that acted as a warrant for our trust. Now we're not so sure. Expert systems have become so enmeshed in each other that the warrant for our trust in one is, often enough, simply another. What if my doctor gives me bad advice? I can complain to the hospital administration, and if I'm not satisfied, I can complain to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (the province where I live). But what if the College fails? To whom do I turn if I lose my faith in it, too? Worse yet, to whom do I turn if I simply lose faith in expert systems altogether? I call the number I find on a "contact us" webpage, but it leads only to a Kafkaesque phone tree, where I navigate through a labyrinth of menus but never reach an actual person.

As we lose faith in expert systems, we also lose our sense of ontological security, or the "confidence that most humans beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (Giddens 92). If expert systems fail—governments cut funding to social safety nets as companies ship jobs overseas—on whom can we count but ourselves to maintain our sense of security? Our modern condition, as Zygmunt Bauman argues, becomes one of existential anxiety, the haunting thought that whatever we're doing, it's not enough:

> Targets may be set only for the current stage of the never-ending effort—and the satisfaction brought by hitting a set target is but momentary. . . . [T]here is no time to rest, and all celebration of the success-thus-far is but a short break before another round of hard work. (Bauman 78)

We feel compelled to prepare for whatever future tests we might face, but because we don't know when or how we might be tested, we'll never know—until we're tested—whether we have prepared enough.

Now

Finally, what is the nature of our current historical moment, the *now* of modernity? It is tempting to see our lives as the culmination of the events that have led up to this point. Such a view would be consistent with the dominant narrative according to which the forces of modernity are universal and lead necessarily to the advanced state we have achieved in the West. But it would also fall into the same trap: it would miss other modernities in other places, following other trajectories, and it would gloss over the uneven way modernity developed in Europe and North America.

Instead, we need to see Western modernity, hybrid and messy, as having developed in fits and starts, a fact that accounts (among other things) for the uneven geographic distribution of access to resources. As a consequence, we also need to rethink our relation to history. History is not an inexorable march toward the present, nor is the present some sort of *telos*, a point where we realize what in the past had only been unanswered potential. Simply put, Western modernity is not (as Francis Fukuyama would have it) the culmination of history. This is a good thing. If we see history as having a direction— if we think it has led inexorably to where we are now—we risk closing off certain choices we would otherwise be in a position to make. (Why fight fate?) If we are not at a historical endpoint, the future remains open-ended and contingent, even if our choices are not readily apparent.

"How we live now": these words capture the ambivalence of modernity and its attendant anxiety. We go out into the world, as the world comes to us. Not only are we exposed to others, but we depend on them, and the more we get to know them, the more our sense of who *we* are (as opposed to who *they* are) is troubled. We fear losing our identity, even if (as I argue below) we can choose to adapt and evolve.

Modern Threats

In the last decade, not to mention the last year, right-wing political parties have grown in popularity in Europe and North America, as leaders have struggled to find ways to accommodate the immigrants and refugees who have arrived on their shores. The Front national in

France, the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, the UK Independence Party in Great Britain—all have made electoral gains by appealing to nativist sentiments and exploiting people's fears of outsiders.

The 2016 election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency is emblematic of this trend. Trump's promises to build a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico, deport millions of undocumented immigrants, and ban Muslims (or subject them to "extreme vetting") all respond to the anxiety that comes from the fear that whatever we're doing, it's probably not enough. During his campaign, nothing captured the logic of this anxiety better than a tweet by his son, Donald Jr., who on September 19 sent out a picture of a bowl of candy and asked, "If I had a bowl of skittles [sic] and I told you just three would kill you [sic]. Would you take a handful? That's our Syrian refugee problem" (cited in Horowitz). The implication was that although most refugees were good, a few were bad, but to guard against the bad, the only choice was to ban everyone. Nothing short of an absolute ban would be enough.

This rhetoric has emboldened people to act on their fear of others, and reports of anti-immigrant (and anti-Muslim) crimes have spiked since Trump's election (Hatewatch Staff). The situation in Europe is similar. We should be careful of this trap: according to Europol, the European Union's law enforcement agency, groups like ISIS are counting on this reaction. It is an explicit part of their strategy and a reason they have begun to shift their focus to "soft targets" such as Bastille Day revelers in Nice or shoppers at a Christmas market in Berlin: "Indiscriminate attacks have a very powerful effect on the public in general, which is one of the main goals of terrorism: to seriously intimidate a population" (Europol 7). They want to encourage absolutist reactions by fostering a sense of insatiable anxiety because such reactions help them recruit new members: "A real and imminent danger is the possibility of elements of the (Sunni Muslim) Syrian refugee diaspora becoming vulnerable to radicalisation once in Europe and being specifically targeted by Islamic extremist recruiters" because of the discrimination and alienation they experience (Europol 9).

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Here, then, is the explosive potential of modern hospitality. Our continued existence depends on our relationship to the stranger—whoever we understand the stranger to be—and our strategies to deal with the threat certain strangers pose. The absolutist path appears to promise security, but it plays into the strategy of the very groups who pose a genuine danger. A more tempered approach appears to promise only risk, but what if that risk had the potential to help us interrupt the logic of the self-fulfilling prophecy?

Modern Hospitality

The radio drama "The Fall of the City" ends when the conqueror that the townspeople fear appears to enter the city. In fact, he is nothing more than an empty suit of armor, but the people submit to him all the same: "The people invent their oppressors: they wish to believe in them. / They wish to be free of their freedom: released from their liberty: / The long labor of liberty ended!" (MacLeish). A similar poem, C. P. Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians," ends without anyone outside the gates at all, only the question, "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians? / Those people were a kind of solution." They were an organizing principle, a common enemy against whom people could rally.

Both works are open to interpretation, but their main point is clear enough: our fear of outsiders plays a central role in how we understand ourselves. The fates they describe could be ours, but they need not be. The dominant narrative of Western modernity needs its villains, but the more complicated alternative narrative makes it hard to preemptively declare an entire group of people good or bad. Ultimately, what matters is our ability to act within the contingencies of a given situation. This is where hospitality becomes possible.

Hospitality implies a certain reciprocity between guest and host. The word even derives from the Latin *hostis*, meaning "guest," and *potis*, meaning "master" (Benveniste). But reciprocity cannot be imposed—demanding that a guest conform to a host's expectations denatures the act of hospitality itself. At the same time, absolute hospitality—opening our doors unconditionally—is risky. We

make ourselves vulnerable at a time where we're already haunted by the idea that however much we do, it might not be enough to keep us safe.

We should look at vulnerability differently. It is valuable *because* it is risky: showing vulnerability can have a humanizing effect for the people to whom we let ourselves become vulnerable because it demonstrates trust. It undermines strategies like those of ISIS to use immigrants' and refugees' feelings of alienation as a recruitment tool.

This is not to say we should make ourselves blindly vulnerable. There is no doubt that some people want to harm us, and we should continue to use lawful means to protect ourselves. But just as the notions of *us* and *them* are contingent on circumstances, so are notions of hospitality. We need to discern between people who are threats and people who aren't. This work can be difficult and requires vigilance to ensure that we welcome those who wish to join us and, in the process, expand the community we refer to when we say "we."

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