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# Reform and Revolution: A Comparative Study on Ethical Concern of European Modern Design

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## Abstract

European modern design arose during the late 19th century and the early 20th century. Its rise has displayed a strong historical interaction with social change towards modernisation in which aesthetics, technology, politics, as well as ethics had been outlined and highlighted. In this research, a comparative study is carried out to investigate the relationship between ethical concern and European modern design movements. By social theories and comparative sociological methods, the study has reviewed the diversified social improvement contributions of European modern design designers or ideologists. It draws the conclusion that Some of concerns managed to overcome social crisis by dissolving industrial society, while the others tried to resolve it by strengthening social industrialisation. The former is interpreted as "retrospective" quality, which reveals traditional humanistic anxiety and the latter as "prospective" quality, which indicates contemporary metropolis' social management trend. It also clarifies the ethical value of modern design movements and practice in Europe.

**Keywords:** European Modern Design, Social Change, Ethical Concern, Reform, Revolution

## 1. Introduction

Reform and revolution, as the basic concepts, have played a key role in illustrating social change towards modernisation. With the assistance of social theories and comparative sociological methods, this research is going to interpret what kind of ideas, in terms of reform and revolution, the designers and ideologists have presented and how they articulate them comparatively in European modern design movements. In this way, the ethical and social value of European modern design practice has been clarified. The potential connection between social change and modern design has been revealed as well.

## 2. Background

Social change is recognised as a continuous changing process in functional structure and operation of society, whose effect cover a wide range of fields, e.g., political system, economic climate, lifestyle, or moral values. Although social change refers to diversified factors and keeps openness, numbers of components have been distinguished so far. They are concluded in technology, ideology, competition, conflict, politics, economics, and structural pressure (Vago, 2007, p. 8-31). In the social change process, Stratification of society and Social conflict

are highlighted for they closely connected to it. Stratification of society is regarded as different positions of social groups originated from economic resource possession, political power division, traditional culture belief and sense of honour, etc. Karl Marx has been concerned because of his stratification theory based on economic resource possession (Giddens, 2003, p. 272), whereas Max Weber has ascribed stratification to more differentiated origins, e.g., the interactive actions of economics, politics, and culture (Collins & Makowsky, 2006, p. 189-193). Social conflict means to struggle and confrontation among different social groups due to varied interests. Lewis A. Coser and Ralf Dahrendorf, as the researchers of social conflict theory, advocated that conflict presents positive actions on social functioning and transforming. The latter even radically insisted that inevitable social conflict could improve social change as "creative power" (Vago, 2007, p. 49-50).

Accordingly, reform and revolution in social change have been linked to social conflict. Reform represents mild reactions on social conflict, which manages to resolve problems in the existed system by compromise and conservatism, while revolution indicates harsh reactions, which overturns the old system, accompanied by severe unrest or the bloody. The relationship of reform and revolution is going to be further illuminated under the social conflict perspective. It is taken for granted that social reform with the gradual process should be an approach to take the place of revolution with anomie, violence, and terror. It has been considered however, that revolution breaks out in consequence of structural force and realistic situations, hence reform is becoming invalid whenever facing revolution. As for this issue, their relationship cannot be titled "alternatives," as if parallel choices. Conversely, they should be viewed as "in order." It signifies that the effective reform is taken to achieve social targets, in order to keep the bloody revolution under cruel situations from happening, although social structure provided an opportunity for revolution. The replacement of reform and revolution, thus, could have been fully outlined.

The brief differentiation between reform and revolution aforesaid does not suggest a differentiation between "good" and "bad." They both are the historical consequence under a unique model of social structure, instead of arbitrary choice upon moral purpose. At least, as direct force, human's will have had a little part of play in it: violence is roused to cope with the fast knot, and terror can hardly be avoided then. Nevertheless, it is not the ground to keep us from reflection on the dark sides of the revolution. Since revolution is carried out in a pressing and forcible way, it most probably gives rise to social catastrophes. Its course and result are unpredictable to a large extent, because of the leading role of violent interactions among diversified social groups and possibly diverges from the expected target (Skocpol, 2007a, p. 18), though high social costs were paid. Despite the bursting violence promotes social progress, it is by no means free from the dark. It causes irrational worship of struggle and ruins humanity, which is essential to a sound society (Vago, 2007, p. 294-295). Violence is innately antisocial: crime becomes antisocial at the lowest level, while revolution at the highest level (Vago, 2007, p. 77). So long as human possess sympathy, we are never relieved from such harm. Social progress does contain not only the abstract political or economic tasks but also the individual situations where people act as parents, sons and daughters, officers, and workers. Granted, that cruel historical course is unavoidable, to reduce social suffering is always a burden on human's shoulders.

As regard the ethical issue under social modernisation background, ideas and practice of European designers and ideologists have been broadly mentioned by the chronicles of modern design history, architecture and urban planning history (Pevsner, 2001, 2003, 2004; Raizman, 2007; Woodham, 2012; Riseboro, 1999; Frampton, 2004, 2007; Kruft, 2005; Mumford, 2005), which demonstrate how could modern design, as social reform methods, change a society or prevent social revolution from happening. This research focuses on the same issue but tries hard to take an intensive exploration into it with the assistance of historical sociology and comparative study (Tocqueville, 1992; Bloch, 2006; Anderson, 2001a, b; Moore, 2013; Skocpol, 2007a, b; Delanty & Isin, 2009). First, the different ethical characteristics of European modern design activities will be reviewed. Second, the ideological qualities are going to be comparatively classified in terms of typology, for the same civilisation background shared by them and the diversified factors in the historical course. A better understanding, then, could be improved on the ethical value of European modern design movements and practice, whose age covered from the 1850s to the 1930s.

### 3. Ethical Concern of European Modern Design: Ideas and Practice

Along with the political scientists and sociologists, the designers and ideologists have been involved in contemplation of social issues during European modern design movements and endeavored to make an answer by their methods. The attempts from England, France, and Germany were truly remarkable: the ideas "to change a society by design" have been disclosed in Arts and Crafts movement of England, French architects Tony Garnier and Le Corbusier, and Weimar Bauhaus. Although such tries were coloured utopian tendency then, they did encourage the link between modern design and social management and have enriched the social significance of modern European design. The following review is going to display these contributions.

#### 3.1 *Arts and Crafts movement and Garden City movement*

The awareness emerged in the period of Arts and Crafts movement for the first time in history. England had experienced industrialisation as the earliest country in Europe, whose leading position transformed manufacturing model and impacted social system and life too. Social problems consequently grew. On the one side, industrial revolution led to the centralisation of manufacturing, increasing industrial cities, high urban population density, and the replacement of village life by city life, where any detail was going to be associated with social issues, e.g., crime, public health problem, or moral degeneration. On the other side, a new social group called "the working class" arose in the industrialised society, whose social standing impelled themselves ready for a confrontation with the upper class, whose manipulation ranged from capital and political power to cultural and ideological resource. Potential social crisis hinted by the tension have been perceived by Marx, the political scientist, as well as by Pevsner, the modern design historian (Pevsner, 2004, p. 24).

It is not difficult to discover the same feeling hidden in John Ruskin and William Morris, the English intellectuals as well as the designers or ideologists involved in Arts and Crafts movement, who managed to find a solution for the earliest industrial society. Realising the relationship between social reform and design practice, they hence became the pioneers in England. It is astonished that their design idea was thoroughly modernised in terms of social responsibility awareness, though the design style of Arts and Crafts movement remained still traditional. Ruskin and Morris advocated that art and culture are related closely to social reform. The former regarded decoration and art as an approach of social improvement (Raizman, 2007, p. 111), while the latter wished handicraft could change the society and thought it is impossible to separate art from morality, politics, and religion (Pevsner, 2004, p. 4). Moreover, they both insisted that art should serve for the public, instead of for the upper class only. Then, it was followed by Morris' "by the people, for the people" (Pevsner, 2001, p. 13). His idea characterised by social integration made him a social reformist (Pevsner, 2004, p. 26) and his theory and practice had the property of social reform (Frampton, 2004, p. 40). Besides Ruskin and Morris, there were a few English designers who hold a practical opinion that the change of environment leads to the change of social system. Richard Norman Shaw had introduced numbers of architecture design offered to the working class and the public, which benefitted for social improvement. Ebenezer Howard had ever been acting the role of social reformist too. He was a participant in Garden City movement, whose aim was to ameliorate the living and working conditions of the working class. Howard's standpoint is reformism, for he preferred gradual reforming to violent revolution (Frampton, 2004, p. 41-42). His idea has been deeply embedded in his Garden City programme (Mumford, 2005, p. 528).

#### 3.2 *French architects: Tony Garnier and Le Corbusier*

The vanguard Garnier has been highlighted conspicuously for the sake of conservatism against industrialisation, e.g., Art Nouveau, during the early period of modern European design in France. Garnier distinctly recognised that architecture or urban planning should adapt to social change. And, industrialisation was becoming the most prominent changing factor at that time. Therefore, "Industrial City" has been conceived by him to respond to social industrialisation trend. Every corner of architecture and functional planning within an industrialised city has been fully taken into consideration in this urban project.

Nonetheless, Garnier's work came into the world as a design practice, instead of a systematic theory which then was put forward by Corbusier. In his theory, Corbusier believed that social reform is not an issue only with technological applications but with political and moral reflection. As English pioneers had done, he became aware of modern social crisis and felt the possible violence and revolution under such crisis: capitalism destroyed the existed social structure, and the reactions will be changed into a subversive power (Pevsner, 2003, p. 76). He also discovered that architecture or urban planning could positively act on modern industrial society, exactly as Garnier had explored. Corbusier hence made his way to regard design as an effective method of social management and theoretically voiced social reform idea in which design is going to take the place of revolution. It was then concluded in his assertion "architecture or revolution" (Frampton, 2004, p. 195). The link between design and politics has been precisely illustrated by Corbusier: a society will gain profits from the modern design if only designers try hard to eliminate social inequality and revolution will be averted accordingly. His political awareness made him a social reformist, and he looked upon himself as a martyr who is to save the world by architecture design (Kruft, 2005, p. 296).

### *3.3 Weimar Bauhaus*

Despite a strong tendency of rationalisation in Dessau, Bauhaus exhibited utopian views in its early age, which was similar to Arts and Crafts movement and William Morris, who was longing for idealised harmony of the Middle Ages too. Walter Gropius, the school founder, expressed this idea under a particular "historical background," however. The First World War hurt Europe spiritually and shadowed a newly industrialised society (Fiedler, 2000, p. 17). Machine was suddenly transformed into a monstrous tool of destruction and killing. Such terrified scene with the massive and automatic destroying can be hardly imagined in any traditional agrarian society. Bauhaus, therefore, was founded at first in Weimar by Gropius with utopian ambition, in order to cope with the spiritual crisis caused by industrialisation and mechanised war. It otherwise cannot be envisaged that Gropius, a modernist under Deutsche Werkbund and Peter Behrens' cultivation and a designer of standardised modern industrial architecture, would follow an old way attempted by Ruskin and Morris. Weimar Bauhaus was dyed a colour of medieval guild to a large degree, and Gropius did insist on the principles of the guild: harmony, autonomy, and honesty (Fiedler, 2000, p. 18). He had provided a utopian ideological basis for the school's educational and organisational practice. Weimar Bauhaus could be regarded as a social experiment replying for the negative influence of industrialisation and as a construction project of idealised society at micro-level. This micro-social experiment revealed Gropius' resolution to amend an injured society by design and education (Raizman, 2007, p. 230-231; Woodham, 2012, p. 54).

## **4. Comparative Analysis**

European modern design movements were not only related to the elements of aesthetics or technology. Rather, they have been closely connected with morality and ethics. Under the impact of social change towards modernisation, actions taken by European modern designers and ideologists were dramatically distinctive. The ethical knowledge which disclosed their anxious concerns over social reform and improvement could have been classified into two typical categories however. One shows a strong willing to return to the past, by which Arts and Crafts movement, Garden City movement, and Weimar Bauhaus have made the solutions. Ruskin, Morris, and Gropius (in the early age of Bauhaus) treated modern capitalism and social industrialisation in disgust, and they all approved the moral value of the Middle Ages, while Howard was eager for traditional and healthy country life. The other, instead, appears a positive attitude to social modernisation and industrialisation. Garnier conceived an urban planning solution for constructing a better industrial society's sake and Corbusier's architecture programmes always displayed the futurism tendency. They both valued the prospective modern city and life by modern design. A comparison of modern European design as social reform methods is presented as follow (Table 1).

Table 1. A comparison of modern European design as social reform methods

Retrospective quality	Prospective quality
Arts and Crafts movement	Tony Garnier
Garden City movement	Le Corbusier
Weimar Bauhaus	

## 5. Conclusions

Ethical and social factors, besides aesthetical and technological (or functional) elements, should be taken into consideration when inspecting the rise of modern design in Europe. Based on the illustration of "social reform," "social revolution," and "social cruelty" of violent revolution, this research has investigated the diversified social reform solutions contributed by European modern design movements in order to improve the society and avoid revolution or crime under the background of social modernisation. The reform solutions have been classified and appear "dual character." Some of them managed to overcome the social crisis by dissolving industrial society, while the others tried to resolve it by strengthening social industrialisation. The former is interpreted as "retrospective" quality, which reveals traditional humanistic anxiety and the latter as "prospective" quality, which indicates contemporary metropolises' social management trend.

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