As a frame for research and teaching, this talk explores the transition to modernity as a social and historical process, and as an idea, a locus of questions, a problem and a paradox. It also highlights key objects, originally designed by and for human hands, that have played momentous roles in shaping the modern world. The sword, map, coin, mask, clock, book ... these objects-become-actors can inspire us to think anew about critical historical transitions as well as the contemporary fabric of our lives.