

TWO THEORIES OF MODERNITY

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1. Two theories to understand the rise of « Modernity »

There seem to be at large in our culture two ways of understanding the rise of modernity. They are in effect two different « takes » on what makes our contemporary society different from its forebears.

In one take, we can look on the difference between present-day society and, say, that of medieval Europe as analogous to the difference between medieval Europe and China or India. In other words, we can think of the difference as one between civilizations, each with their own culture.

Or alternatively, we can see the change from earlier centuries to today as involving something like « development », as the demise of a "traditional" society and the rise of the « modern ». And in this perspective, which seems to be the dominant one, things look rather different.

I want to call the first kind of understanding a *cultural* one, and the second *acultural*. In using these terms, I am leaning on a use of the word *culture* which is analogous to the sense it often has in anthropology. I am evoking the picture of a plurality of human cultures, each of which has a language and a set of practices that define specific understandings of personhood, social relations, states of mind/soul, goods and bads, virtues and vices, and the like. These languages are often mutually untranslatable. With this model in mind, a « cultural » theory of modernity is one that characterizes the transformations that have issued in the modern West mainly in terms of the rise of a new culture. The contemporary Atlantic world is seen as one culture (or group of closely related cultures) among others, with its own specific understandings, for example, of person, nature, the good,

to be contrasted to all others, including its own predecessor civilization (with which it obviously also has a lot in common). By contrast, an « acultural » theory is one that describes these transformations in terms of some culture-neutral operation. By this I mean an operation that is not defined in terms of the specific cultures it carries us from and to, but is rather seen as of a type that any traditional culture could undergo.

An example of an acultural type of theory, indeed a paradigm case, would be one that conceives of modernity as the growth of reason, defined in various ways : 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. Or else modernity might be accounted for in terms of social, as well as intellectual changes : the transformations, including the intellectual ones, are seen as coming about as a result of increased mobility, concentration of populations, industrialization, or the like. In all these cases, modernity is conceived as a set of transformations that any and every culture can go through-and that all will probably be forced to undergo.

These changes are not defined by their end point in a specific constellation of understandings of, say, person, society, good, they are rather described as a type of transformation to which any culture could in principle serve as « input ».

For instance, any culture could suffer the impact of growing scientific consciousness ; any religion could undergo secularization ; any set of ultimate ends could be challenged by a growth of instrumental thinking ; any metaphysic could be dislocated by the split between fact and value.

So modernity in this kind of theory is understood as issuing from a rational or social operation that is culture-neutral. This is not to say that the theory cannot acknowledge good historical reasons why this transformation first arose in one civilization rather than another, or why some may undergo it more easily than others. The point rather is that the operation is defined not in terms of its specific point of arrival, but as a general function that can take any specific culture as its input.

To grasp the difference from another angle, the operation is not seen as supposing or reflecting an option for one specific set of human values or understandings among others. In the case of « social » explanations, causal weight is given to historical developments, like industrialization, that have an impact on values but are often not seen

as reflecting specific options in this domain. When it comes to explanations in terms of «rationality», this is seen as the exercise of a general capacity that was only awaiting its proper conditions to unfold. Under certain conditions, human beings will just come to see that scientific thinking is valid, that instrumental rationality pays off, that religious beliefs involve unwarranted leaps, that facts and values are separate. These transformations may be facilitated by our having certain values and understandings, just as they are hampered by the dominance of others ; but they are not defined as the espousal of some such constellation. They are defined rather by something we come to see concerning the whole context in which values and understandings are espoused.

It should be evident that the dominant theories of modernity over the last two centuries have been of the acultural sort. Many have explained its development at least partly by our «coming to see» something like the range of supposed truths mentioned above. Or else the changes have been explained partly by culture-neutral social developments, such as Durkheim's move from "mechanical" to differentiated, "organic" forms of social cohesion; or Tocqueville's assumption of creeping "democracy" (by which he meant a push toward equality). On one interpretation, «rationalization» was for Weber a steady process, occurring within all cultures over time.

But above all, explanations of modernity in terms of «reason» seem to be the most popular. And even the «social» explanations tend to invoke reason as well, since the social transformations, like mobility and industrialization, are thought to bring about intellectual and spiritual changes because they shake people loose from old habits and beliefs-in, for example, religion or traditional morality-which then become unsustainable because they have no independent rational grounding in the way the beliefs of modernity - in, for example, individualism or instrumental reason - are assumed to have.

But, one might object, how about the widespread and popular negative theories of modernity, those that see it not as gain but as loss or decline? Curiously enough, they too have been acultural in their own way. To see this, we have to enlarge somewhat the description above. Instead of seeing the transformations as the unfolding of capacities, negative theories have often interpreted them as falling prey to dangers. But these have often been just as aculturally conceived.

Modernity is characterized by the loss of the horizon; by a loss of roots; by the hubris that denies human limits and denies our dependence on history or God, which places unlimited confidence in the powers of frail human reason; by a trivializing self-indulgence which has no stomach for the heroic dimension of life, and so on. The overwhelming weight of interpretation in our culture, positive and negative, tends to the acultural.

On the other side, the voices are fewer if powerful. Nietzsche, for instance, offers a reading of modern scientific culture that paints it as actuated by a specific constellation of values. And Max Weber, besides offering a theory of rationalization which can at any rate be taken as a steady, culture-independent force, also gave a reading of the Protestant ethic as defined by a particular set of religion-moral concerns, which in turn helped to bring about modern capitalism.

2.The Distortions of the Aultural

So acultural theories predominate. Is this bad? I think it is. In order to see why, we have to bring out a bit more clearly what these theories foreground and what they tend to screen out.

Acultural theories tend to describe the transition in terms of a loss of traditional beliefs and allegiances. This may be seen as coming about as a result of institutional changes : for example, mobility and urbanization erode the beliefs and reference points of static rural society. Or the loss may be supposed to arise from the increasing operation of modern scientific reason. The change may be positively valued - or it may be judged a disaster by those for whom the traditional reference points were valuable and scientific reason too narrow. But all these theories concur in describing the process : old views and loyalties are eroded. Old horizons are washed away, in Nietzsche's image. The sea of faith recedes, following Arnold. This stanza from his « Dover Beach » captures this perspective :

The Sea of Faith

*Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.*

The tone here is one of regret and nostalgia. But the underlying image of eroded faith could serve just as well for an upbeat story of the progress of triumphant scientific reason. From one point of view, humanity has shed a lot of false and harmful myths. From another, it has lost touch with crucial spiritual realities. But in either case, the change is seen as a loss of belief. What emerges comes about through this loss. The upbeat story cherishes the dominance of an empirical-scientific approach to knowledge claims, of individualism, negative freedom, instrumental rationality. But these come to the fore because they are what we humans « normally » value, once we are no longer impeded or blinded by false or superstitious beliefs and the stultifying modes of life that accompany them. Once myth and error are dissipated, these are the only games in town. The empirical approach is the only valid way of acquiring knowledge, and this becomes evident as soon as we free ourselves from the thralldom of a false metaphysics. Increasing recourse to instrumental rationality allows us to get more and more of what we want, and we were only ever deterred from this by unfounded injunctions to limit ourselves. Individualism is the normal fruit of human self-regard absent the illusory claims of God, the Chain of Being, or the sacred order of society. In other words, we moderns behave as we do because we have « come to see » that certain claims were false - or on the negative reading, because we have lost from view certain perennial truths. What this view reads out of the picture is the possibility that Western modernity might be powered by its own positive visions of the good, that is, by one constellation of such visions among available others, rather than by the only viable set left after the old myths and legends have been exploded. It screens out whatever there might be of a specific moral direction to Western modernity, beyond what is dictated by the general form of human life itself, once old errors shown up (or old truth forgotten). For example, people behave as individuals, because that is what they « naturally » do when no longer held in by the old religions, metaphysics, and customs, though this may be seen as a glorious liberation, or a purblind enmiring in egoism, depending on our perspective. What it cannot be seen as is a novel form of moral self-understanding, not definable simply by the negation of what preceded it. Otherwise put, what gets screened out is the possibility that Western modernity might be sustained by its own spiritual vision, that is, not on degenerated simply and inescapably out of the transition.

3. The attraction of the Acultural.

Before trying to say how bad or good this is, I want to speculate about the motives for this predominance of the Acultural. In one way, it is quite understandable when we reflect that we Westerners have been living the transition to modernity for some centuries out of the civilization we used to call Christendom. It is hard to live through a change of this moment without being partisan, and in this spirit we quite naturally reach for explanations that are immediately evaluative, on one side or the other. Now nothing stamps the changes as more unproblematically right than the account that we have « come to see » through certain falsehoods, just as the explanations that we have come to forget important truths brands it as unquestionably wrong. To make such confident judgments on the basis of acultural account would presuppose our having carried through a complex comparative assessment of modernity's original vision, over against that of the Christendom that preceded it, to a clear unambiguous conclusion – hardly an easy task, if realizable at all. Indeed, since a cultural theory supposes the point of view in which we see our own culture as one among others, and this at best is a recent acquisition in our civilization, it is not surprising that the first accounts of revolutionary change were acultural. For the most part our ancestors looked on other civilizations as made up of barbarians, or infidels, or savages. It would have been absurd to expect the contemporaries of the French Revolution, on either side of the political divide, to have seen the cultural shift within this political upheaval, when the very idea of cultural pluralism was just dawning in the writings of, say, Herder. But even when this standpoint becomes more easily available, we are drawn by our partisan attachments to neglect it. This is partly because an immediately evaluative explanation (on the right side) is more satisfying - we tend to want to glorify modernity, or vilify it. And it is partly because we fear that a cultural theory might make value judgements impossible. The latter notion is, I believe, a mistake; but mistake or not, it plays a role here. But another thing acultural theories have going for them has been the vogue for « materialistic » explanations in social science and history. By this I mean, in this context, explanations that shy away from invoking moral or spiritual factors in favor of (what are thought to be) harder and more down to earth causes. And so the developments I adverted to above – the growth of science, individualism, negative freedom, instrumental reason, and the other striking features of the culture of modernity - have often been accounted for as by-products of social change : for instance, as spinoffs from industrialization, or greater mobility, or

urbanization. There are certainly important causal relations to be traced here, but the accounts that invoke them frequently skirt altogether the issue whether these changes in culture and outlook owe anything to their own inherent power as moral ideals. The implicit answer is often in the negative.

Of course, the social changes that are supposed to spawn the new outlook must themselves be explained, and this will involve some recourse to human motivations, unless we suppose that industrialization or the growth of cities occurred entirely in a fit of absence of mind. We need some notion of what moved people to push steadily in one direction – for example, toward the greater application of technology to production, or toward greater concentrations of population. But what is invoked here are often motivations that are non moral. By that I mean motivations that can actuate people quite without connection to any moral ideal, as I defined this earlier. So we very often find these social changes explained in terms of the desire for greater wealth, or power, or the means of survival or control over others. Of course, all these things can be woven into moral ideals, but they need not be. And so explanation in terms of them is considered sufficiently « hard » and « scientific ». And even where individual freedom and the enlargement of instrumental reason are seen as ideas whose intrinsic attractions can help explain their rise, this attraction is frequently understood in non-moral terms. That is, the power of these ideas is often understood not in terms of their moral force, but just because of the advantages they seem to bestow on people regardless of their moral outlook, or even whether they have a moral outlook. Freedom allows you to do what you want; and the greater application of instrumental reason gets you more of what you want, whatever that is. It is obvious that wherever this kind of explanation becomes culturally dominant, the motivation to explore the original spiritual vision of modernity is very weak ; indeed, the capacity even to recognize some such thing nears zero. And this effectively takes cultural theories off the agenda. Uniform and Inevitable Modernities . So what, if anything, is bad about this?

4.What is bad in the current approach to Modernity ?

Two things. First, I think Western modernity is in part based on an original moral outlook. This is not to say that our account of it in terms of our « coming to see » certain things is wholly wrong. On the contrary : post-17th century natural science has a validity, and the accompanying

technology an efficacy, that we have established. And all societies are sooner or later forced to acquire this efficacy, or be dominated by others (and hence have it imposed on them anyway). But it would be quite wrong to think that we can make do with an acultural theory alone. It is not just that other facets of what we identify as modern, such as the tendency to try to split fact from value, or the decline of religious practice, are far from reposing on incontestable truths that have finally been discovered-as one can claim for modern physics, for example. It is also that science itself has grown in the West in close symbiosis with a certain culture in the sense I am using that term here, namely, a constellation of understandings of person, nature, society, and the good. To rely on an acultural theory is to miss all this.

One gets a distorted understanding of Western modernity in one of two ways : on one side, we misclassify certain changes, which ultimately reflect the culture peculiar to the modern West, as the product of unproblematic discovery of the ineluctable consequence of some social change, like the introduction of technology. The decline in religious practice has frequently been seen in this light. This is the error of seeing everything modern as belonging to one Enlightenment package.

On the other side, we fail altogether to examine certain facets of the modern constellation, closely interwoven with our understandings of science and religion, that do not strike us as being part of the transformation to modernity. We do not identify them as among the spectacular changes that have produced contemporary civilization, and we often fail to see even that there have been changes, reading these facets falsely as perennial. Such is the usual fate of those (largely implicit) understandings of human agency that I have grouped under the portmanteau term « the modern identity » - such as the various forms of modern inwardness, or the affirmation of ordinary life. We all too easily imagine that people have always seen themselves as we do, in respect, for example, of dichotomies like inward/outward. And we thus utterly miss the role these new understandings have played in the rise of Western modernity. I want to make a claim of this kind below in relation to the rise of the modern public sphere. And so a purely acultural theory distorts and impoverishes our understanding of ourselves, both through misclassification (the Enlightenment package error), and through too narrow a focus.

But its effects on our understanding of other cultures is even more devastating. The belief that modernity comes from one single universally applicable operation imposes a falsely uniform pattern on

the multiple encounters of non-Western cultures with the exigencies of science, technology, and industrialization. As long as we are bemused by the Enlightenment package, we will believe that they all have to undergo a range of cultural changes drawn from our experience - such as «secularization» or the growth of atomistic forms of self-identification. As long as we leave our own notions of identity unexamined, so long will we fail to see how theirs differ, and how this difference crucially conditions the way in which they integrate the truly universal features of «modernity». Moreover, the view that modernity arises through the dissipation of certain unsupported religious and metaphysical beliefs seems to imply that the paths of different civilizations are bound to converge. As they lose their traditional illusions, they will come together on the «rationally grounded» outlook that has resisted the challenge. The march of modernity will end up making all cultures look the same. This means, of course, that we expect they will end up looking like us. In short, exclusive reliance on an acultural theory unfits us for what is perhaps the most important task of social sciences in our day : understanding the full gamut of alternative modernities in the making in different parts of the world. It locks us into an ethnocentric prison, condemned to project our own forms onto everyone else and blissfully unaware of what we are doing.