

POST MODERNITY AND ITS DISCONTENT

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Abstract

Notions parading as novelties usually have a past. Modernity, through a relative newcomer on the conceptual scene, has actually been around a long time, under other names. But the French Enlightenment established the term more in the way we use it today. The philosophes declared that a dispute between the ancient and modern was being resolved in favour of the latter. Modern, post- medieval civilization, based supremely on Reason, was superior. The related controversy over 'postmodernism' within the empires of art, architecture, literary and film criticism has raged for some- what longer. So the postmodern has leaked out well beyond the ivory towers denoting for many a range of everyday lived experiences. The concept of postmodernity is worth pursuing because it alerts us to a serious of highly important questions. It raises our sensitivity and helps us see certain issues as problems to be explained.

Introduction:

For postmodernity has indeed shown an extraordinary capacity to renew itself in the conflagration of its demise. One might almost say that the derivative character of postmodernism, the name of which indicates that it comes after something else modernism, modernity, or the modern guarantees it an extended tenure that the naming of itself as an ex nibilo beginning might not. Like Shelley's famous fading coal of inspiration, the weakening of postmodernism itself can be turned into the same kind of regenerative resource as the weakening of modernism itself. The effect of this was that, by the beginning of the 1990s, the concept of the postmodern was ceasing to be used principally in the analysis of particular objects or cultural areas and had become a general horizon or hypothesis.

MODERNITY'S ACHIEVEMENT

The achievement of modernity is surprising. In the space of a few decades a transformation began in Europe that would alter the world in unprecedented and irreversible ways. Much of what we now take for granted as 'normal' aspects of everyday life would have been unthinkable to my great grandmother, let alone to hers. While my grandmother rode in a car a Morris Cowley to be precise and used the telephone, her mother was more familiar with steam trains and the telegraph. Her mother, in turn, relied on horses for transport, though she did witness the birth of the postage stamp for letter communication. The customs of everyday life are altered, for instance, when we no longer have to rely on face-to-face relationship in order to communicate. Our social relations become stretched over time and space, connected by tissues of TV signals and fibre- optic cables. The little paths More and more, we do things at a distance. The little paths we trace between dawn and dusk are quite sunrise and nightfall frame our coming and going. Even 'dawn and dusk'

are less meaningful concepts when activities can continue uninterrupted by the loss of natural light. Artificial electric light simply takes over, and we come to depend on it doing so.

But not only are the consequences of such technical developments deeply social, the causes are as well. The most conspicuous mother driving them is capitalism, with its constant quest for new raw materials, new sources of labour power and more recently, new technologies to supplement or replace that labour power and one innovation deposited another.

In this phrase Marx catches the societal scope of the changes taking place, changes that others have limited by terms such as 'industrialization'. In truth, while 'modernity' may seem a rather vague term, it does have the virtue of indicating the sheer greatness of social changes consequent upon industrial- capitalist- technological growth. If we think of the motor car again, we see that aspects of industrial production, such as specialization, uniformity, standardization, became common features of modern life. We assume that identical parts can replace worn or broken ones.

DIFFERENTIATION

Marx may be the social analyst par excellence of early modernity- understood as capitalist society but other sociologist also made distinctive contributions that help us grasp what was going on. The emerging industrial society was characterized by a steadily increasing division of labour, in which tasks become progressively more specialized. Emile Durkheim's contribution was to suggest how this process of differentiation lay behind a new principle of social integration, what he called 'organic' rather than 'mechanical' solidarity. The latter, older type, relied on coercion and the heavy hand of tradition, whereas the former developed out of the growing interdependence fostered by the division of labour. An optimistic view, not shared by Marx, as we shall see.

Durkheim's sociology laid the groundwork for a major theme that would engage social scientists in the twentieth century how differentiation spreads to all social spheres. Not only is 'work' split off from 'home' but also from 'leisure', 'religion' and so on.' 'public' life was by the same token distinguished from 'private' in novel ways, and along with these the lives of men and of women were also redefined in terms of specialist tasks. By the mid twentieth century, extended families would contract into nuclear, and become primarily units of consumption rather than production. Tasks once performed by the family or the Church were taken over by schools, youth culture, and mass media on the hand, or by local hospitals and welfare department on the other. During the twentieth century this theme would be taken up by Talcott Parsons and his school of sociology. Working on an organic analogy, Parsons suggested that new subsystems are constantly evolving, both differentiated from each other and better able to adapt, thus ensuring that as modernity progressed it would be better able to cope with its own problems. Differentiation would throw up problems of addition; in particular, how to direct complex society. The answer, for Parsons, lay in the creation of a meritocracy.

RATIONALIZATION

Where Marx's sociology gives us a world of commodities, ruled by the restless pursuit of profit, and Durkheim's a world of detailed subdividing go tasks and responsibilities, Max Weber's vision of modernity was somewhat different again. For him, rationalization is the key. By this he meant the gradual adoption of a calculating attitude towards more and more aspects of life. Having pushed what he saw as the 'spirit and demons' of tradition culture into the wings, the rational approach that underlay science and that found its most dynamic expression in the capitalist economy took centre stage, systematically infusing every sector of society. Authority derived more and more from this calculating rationality, less and less from tradition.

To observe, to calculate, these are the hallmarks of modernity for Weber. The scientist's laboratory method, the capitalist's edger of profit and loss, the bureaucrat's rules and ranks within the organization, all testify to the significance of rationalization. Such careful calculation created control; it was a means to mastery. Nature could be 'tamed', cities rendered safe, worker made docile, book be balanced, and complexity contained, all by the application of the tool of rationality. But the same tendency spilled over into art and music as well; machine-like precision became a motif of painting, by new idea of harmony.

DISCIPLINE

Such a goal of modernity, rationally to exclude and eliminate the criminal, the deviant, follows, naturally from the classificatory controlling impulse seen in sphere after sphere. The city was one such sphere, but many others emerged. Modernity may also be related to the rise of the military as a specialist aspect of the new nation state. The uniform, the drill, the divisions into strict hierarchies of rank, all were intended to make the military operate with efficiency and to ensure that all fell into line.

Indeed, distinctive disciplinary tactics and strategies emerged from the early modern period on word. As sociological historians from Max Weber to Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias have shown, older ways of keeping order, such as the public and brutal treatment of offenders, gave ways to modes that emphasized self-discipline, self-control. Such discipline, came to characterize many social contexts.

MODERNITY'S INCOMPLETENESS

One danger of considering modernity's achievement is that the concept may actually take on a life of its own, to its own; to be 'reified' into a self-propelling force that affects everything it touches. But it remains a mere concept, a mental construct, and a grid for helping us organize our thinking about complex social realities. It helps to highlight certain features of contemporary life, such as the role of technology in kind of relationships. But, if taken to be a total system, it simply obscures as much as it illumination. It manifestly is not. The modern world never was 'dis-encharned' in any more than a partial and limited fashion.

Recognizing that modernity, whatever it is, has not gone quite the way some of its original intended has stimulated sever kinds of analysis parallel to postmodern ones, but denying the logic of the latter. The current crises of modernity, for Touraine, represents not the denial of secularization and trust in reason, but a transition to a more

complete modernity, in which Reason and the subject will once more be affirmed. Hope in humanity is reasserted and social movements are its bearer. The modern project may yet be carried forward by a theory of communication that can help mediate between different positions.

CONCLUSION

The self-consciousness of risk society that constantly monitors mercury levels in water or calculates the chances of epidemics and industrial accidents, is highlighted in Anthony Giddens's concept of 'reflexive' modernity. Modernity as the application of techno science to industrial production meets its nemesis in oil spills, smogs, dustbowls and meltdowns. But widespread awareness of this, individually and institutionally, remarks modernity without rejecting it. Giddens's gets the prizes for production prefixes to modernity, having come up with 'late', 'high' and 'radicalized' as well as 'reflexive' modernity. As he understands it, high modernity accentuates certain features of modernity, especially the influence of distant happenings on local events, and on the self, mediated by electronic modes of communication.

Reference

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