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Modernity and Difference

Charles Taylor

One set of issues has been very underexamined in contemporary scholarship. These issues have to do with how we understand the rise of modernity, its relation to the predecessor 'traditional' cultures, and the scope for difference within this. Some crucial questions here have been, as it were, kept off our screens by the hold of too narrow – one might say, too monistic – theories in this area.

I'd like to lay out, in programmatic fashion, some ways that these questions can be approached. I am conscious in doing this of approaching the concerns that have animated much of Stuart Hall's work over several decades. Stuart has constantly sought to open new ways of talking about contemporary realities, which are difficult to bring in focus through the languages dominant in our recognized university disciplines. I should like here to follow a little way in his footsteps.

My remarks will centre around two related themes, which can be captured in the phrases 'multiple modernities' and 'social imaginary', respectively.

'Multiple Modernities'

Two ways of understanding the rise of modernity seem to be at large in our culture. 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 its 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'm leaning on a use of the word 'culture' that 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 which 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 a 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 rather is 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: 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. 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 which any and every culture can go through – and which 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.

It should be evident that the dominant theories of modernity over the last two centuries have been of the acultural sort. One might argue

relating the state to the private sector – differences to which the mindless neo-liberalism fashionable today is blind. A given society will, indeed must, adopt the mode for which it has the cultural resources. That is the essence of creative adaptation.

The cultures of entrepreneurship provide, of course, only one example. There is also important research to be done on the place and use of media in society; on the ways the functions of the North Atlantic 'welfare state' are assumed or not by different kinds of community: family, clan, caste, et cetera.; on the very different political cultures of representative democracies: For instance, in India there is a strong attachment of masses of people to the forms of parliamentary democracy, but the way these are 'imagined' by Indian voters obviously differs from North Atlantic models; and yet remarkably little work has been done on the shape of this social imaginary. Again, modern societies obviously differ greatly in the place they have for religion, and this is so even between states that are alike in espousing some variant of 'secularism'. What exists under this label in India, for instance, is completely different from its counterpart in France or the USA. And there are many more such areas begging for further study.

If this perspective of divergence in convergence is right, then we can see how 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 that are 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.

The 'Social Imaginary'

The term 'social imaginary' has already arisen in the above discussion, and inevitably so, because any attempt to define the different cultures of modernity cannot be satisfied just with marking differences in explicit theory and in institutions. Indeed, these may not be very great. What matters, and what helps determine the repertoire of practices that a given population has at its disposal, is how the society with its institutions and practices is imagined by those who live in and by these.

It is important to distinguish the social imaginary from social theory. There are a number of crucial differences between the two. I speak of 'imaginary', first, because I'm talking about the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms: it is carried in images, stories, legends, et cetera. But it is also the case, second, that theory is often the possession of small

minority, whereas what is interesting in a social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. That leads to a third difference: the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and widely shared sense of legitimacy.

The social imaginary sometimes evolves in the same direction as theory, but often considerably after it. Thus the modern notion of a social order based on the mutual benefit of equal participants is elaborated first in theories of the State of Nature and contract in the seventeenth century (for example, Grotius and Locke). But something similar only enters the social imaginary, and hence action, of significant groups in the following century. We see this, for instance with the developing idea of the public sphere in the eighteenth century. The dispersed publications and small-group or local exchanges come to be construed as one big debate, from which the 'public opinion' of a whole society emerges. This is the first time that such a meta-topical, continuing space is conceived of as grounded in nothing other than common action in secular time, that is, without the kind of action-transcendent grounding in higher time that kingdoms, Churches, long-established legal systems enjoyed.[4]

After, and partly on the basis of the public sphere, the modern theory of legitimacy mutates into a social imaginary that makes popular sovereignty the main, and later the only possible, basis of legitimacy. We can see how older ideas of legitimacy are colonized, as it were, with the new understandings of order, and then transformed, in certain cases, without a clear break.

The United States is a case in point. The reigning notions of legitimacy in Britain and America, the ones that fired the English Civil War, for instance, as well as the beginnings of the Colonies' rebellion, were basically backward-looking. They turned around the idea of an 'ancient constitution', an order based on law holding 'since time out of mind', in which Parliament had its rightful place beside the King. This was typical of premodern understandings of order, which referred back to a 'time of origins' (Eliade's phrase), which was not in ordinary time.

This earlier justification emerges from the American Revolution transformed into a full-fledged foundation in popular sovereignty, whereby the US constitution is put in the mouth of 'We, the people'. The transition is the easier, because what was understood as the traditional law gave an important place to elected assemblies and their consent to taxation. All that was needed was (a) to shift the balance in these so as to make elections the only source of legitimate power, and (b) to reconceive what was taking place in these elections as an expression of a popular will to refound the state.

that this is wrong for a host of reasons. But what I want to bring out here is that these dominant theories tend to prejudge the case against diversity, and too easily predict a future of greater and greater uniformity across cultures.

Acultural theories tend to describe the transition to modernity 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 was 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 Matthew 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.[1]

Now 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 of change. 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.

This idea of 'modernity' (in the singular) as a point of convergence is very much imbued with the logic of the acultural theory. 'Development' occurs in 'traditional' societies through 'modernization'. For this concept of the 'traditional', what matters is not the specific features of earlier societies, which are very different from each other. What is crucial is just that by holding people within a sacred horizon, a fixed community, and unchallengeable custom, traditional societies impede development. Over against the blazing light of modern reason, all traditional societies look alike in their immobile night.

What they hold us back from is 'development', conceived as the unfolding of our potentiality to grasp our real predicament and apply instrumental reason to it. The instrumental individual of secular outlook is always already there, ready to emerge when the traditional impediments fall away.

'Development' occurs through 'modernization', which designates the ensemble of those culture-neutral processes, both in outlook (individuation, rise of instrumental reason), and in institutions and practices (industrialization, urbanization, mass literacy, the introduction of markets and bureaucratic states) that carry us through the transition.

This viewpoint projects a future in which we all emerge together into a single, homogeneous world culture. In our 'traditional' societies, we were very different from each other. But once these earlier horizons have been lost, we shall all be the same.

A cultural theory opens up a rather different gamut of prospects. If the transition to modernity is like the rise of a new culture, analogous to the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, or of Indonesia to Islam after the fourteenth century, then as in all such cases, the starting point will leave its impress on the end product. So Christianity was deeply marked by Greek philosophy, and Indonesian Islam is rather unlike the religion of the rest of the Islamic world. In a parallel fashion, transitions to what we might recognize as modernity, taking place in different civilizations, will produce different results, reflecting the civilizations' divergent starting points. Their understandings of the person, social relations, states of mind, goods and bads, virtues and vices, sacred and profane, are likely to be distinct. The future of our world will be one in which all societies will undergo change, in institutions and outlook, and some of these changes may be parallel. But it will not converge, because new differences will emerge from the old.

Thus, instead of speaking of 'modernity' in the singular, we should better speak of 'multiple modernities'.

Now the belief in modernity as convergence is not just the fruit of an acultural theory. Just as the account of the transition to modernity as our 'coming to see' certain things contains a partial truth, so there is undoubtedly *some* convergence involved in the triumphal march of modernity. A viable theory of alternative modernities has to be able to relate both the pull to sameness and the forces making for difference.

From one point of view, modernity is like a wave, flowing over and engulfing one traditional culture after another. If we understand by modernity, *inter alia*, the changes discussed above that carry the transition – namely, the emergence of a market-industrial economy, of a bureaucratically organized state, of modes of popular rule – then its progress is, indeed, wavelike. The first two changes, if not the third, are

Now what has to take place for this change to come off is a transformed social imaginary, in which the idea of foundation is taken out of the mythical early time, and seen as something that people can do today. In other words, it becomes something that can be brought about by collective action in contemporary, purely secular time. This happened sometime in the eighteenth century, but really more towards its end than its beginning. Elites propounded *theories* of founding action beforehand, but these had not adequately sunk into the general social imaginary for them to be acted on. So that 1688, radical departure as it may seem to us in retrospect, was presented as an act of continuity, of return to a pre-existent legality. (We are fooled by a change in semantics. The 'Glorious Revolution' had the original sense of a return to the original position; not the modern sense of a innovative turn-over. Of course, it helped by its *Wirkungsgeschichte* to alter the sense.)

This fit between theory and social imaginary is crucial to any outcome. Popular sovereignty could be invoked in the American case, because it had a generally agreed institutional meaning. All colonists agreed that the way to found a new constitution was through some kind of assembly, perhaps slightly larger than the normal one, such as in Massachusetts in 1779. The force of the old representative institutions helped to 'interpret' in practical terms the new concept of popular sovereignty.

The case of the French Revolution was quite different, with fateful effects. The impossibility remarked by all historians of 'bringing the Revolution to an end'[5] came partly from this, that any particular expression of popular sovereignty could be challenged by some other, with substantial support. Thus the members of the Convention were eventually purged in 1793 under threat of the activists from the Paris sections, and that in the name of the 'people'. The immediate consequences are too horrible and too well known to need repetition.

Similarly, there may be a gap between the theory and social imaginary of political elites, and those of the less educated classes, or those of people in rural areas. This again is something that has been well documented for France during most of the nineteenth century, in spite of the confident remarks of republican leaders about the nation 'one and indivisible'.[6] The transformation wrought by the Third Republic was to make this vision of France real for the first time. We can only understand this change as a transformation of the social imaginary.

So, looking at the modern social imaginary has obvious relevance and interest for the history of the last few centuries. But it is not just relevant to the past. One of the most important features of modern

society is precisely that it has developed a new range of social imaginaries, which underlie its peculiar understandings of legitimation, most specially popular sovereignty. These are at the heart of modern political life, and the problems it suffers from.

Here something that arose in the discussion of multiple modernities becomes relevant. Once one sees modern cultures in the plural, one can see that the differences do not only lie between 'civilizations'. Even different North Atlantic societies diverge in significant ways. I referred to this above in connection with entrepreneurial cultures. But it is also evident in the social imaginaries underpinning popular sovereignty. The work of Pierre Rosanvallon, tracing the advent of universal suffrage in France, illustrates this very tellingly.[7]

Modern society invents or imagines a new collective agency that it requires: the 'people', sometimes also called in France and America in the eighteenth century the 'nation'. This collective agency must have a certain kind of unity if it is to function as it is supposed to. How are we to understand this unity?

One of the most common modes has been what we call 'nationalism', that is, the understanding of the people's unity as grounded in a preexisting oneness as a nation, defined by language, culture or history. Modern nationalism is still something that baffles us. Some authors have understood that it requires a certain form of social imaginary.[8] But not all seem to understand the importance of this.

We need to understand better the important features of this kind of social imaginary, the more so in that theories of nationalism tend to be rather thin. We have to understand the ways in which it incorporates typically modern understandings of time, of space, of history – for instance, the typical narrativity of the growth of potential culture or consciousness into actualization, which involves a very different temporality from the pre-modern modes.

We also have to understand how this social imaginary can be imposed by elites on very different kinds of popular imaginaries, producing a wide range of compromise forms, which are very different from each other. People still often speak as though 'nationalism' were a single phenomenon, perhaps with less or more virulent forms, but in essence the same from Scotland to the Respublika Srbska; and this seems very wrong.

And not only nationalism, but the modern phenomena, and problems, of civil society, of the public sphere, of the conditions of mutual trust, of secular regimes, of multiculturalism, all need to be re-examined in this light. In addition, there is the entire phenomenon of 'development', that is, the evolution of societies under the impress of others, more 'advanced', who borrow, adapt, create new and hybrid

in a sense irresistible. Whoever fails to take them on, or some good functional equivalent, will fall so far behind in the power stakes as to be taken over, and forced to undergo these changes anyway. It was a stark appreciation of these power relations that impelled Japanese elites in the Meiji era, for instance, to undertake pre-emptive modernization. The fate of other Asian societies that had not managed to do so was an eloquent plea for this policy. There are good reasons in the relations of force for the onward march of modernity so defined.

But modernity as lived from the inside, as it were, is something different. The institutional changes just described always shake up and alter traditional culture. They did this in the original development in the West, and they have done this elsewhere. But outside those cases where the original culture is destroyed, and the people either die or are forcibly assimilated – and European colonialism has a number of such cases to its discredit – a successful transition involves a people finding resources in their traditional culture that, modified and transposed, will enable them to take on the new practices. In this sense, modernity is not a single wave. It would be better, as I have just suggested, to speak of multiple modernities, as the cultures that emerge in the world to carry the institutional changes turn out to differ in important ways from each other. Thus a Japanese modernity, an Indian modernity, various modulations of Islamic modernity will probably enter alongside the gamut of Western societies, which are also far from being totally uniform.

Seen in this perspective, we can see that modernity – the wave – can be felt as a threat to a traditional culture. It will remain an external threat to those deeply committed against change. But there is another reaction, among those who want to take on some version of the institutional changes. Unlike the conservatives, they don't want to refuse these innovations. They want of course to avoid the fate of those aboriginal people who have simply been engulfed and made over by the external power. What they are looking for is a creative adaptation, drawing on the cultural resources of their tradition, which would enable them to take on the new practices successfully. In short they want to do what has already been done in the West. But they see, or sense, that that cannot consist in copying the West's adaptations. The creative adaptation using traditional resources has by definition to be different from culture to culture. Just taking over Western modernity couldn't be the answer. Or, otherwise put, this answer comes too close to engulfment. They have to invent their own modernity.

There is thus a 'call to difference' felt by 'modernizing' elites which corresponds to something objective in their situation. This is of course part of the background to nationalism.

Now just wanting a creative adaptation doesn't ensure that one brings it off. And some of the formulae proposed look with hindsight pretty much non-starters; as for instance the idea put forward by the government of Ching China after the Opium War, which can be roughly rendered: we'll take their technology and keep our culture. There are moments where the 'modernizers' begin to look indistinguishable from the conservative enemies of change.

This kind of resistance results in what Rajeev Bhargava has called 'patchwork' solutions, which attempt to tack the new power-conferring practices onto an unchanged way of life.[2] But these institutions and practices almost always require new disciplines, new understandings of agency, new forms of sociability. We have only to think of what is required to participate as an entrepreneur in a modern market economy, or the kind of 'rationalized' co-ordination required by a modern bureaucracy, to see that this is so. The really creative adaptation is one that can modify our existing culture so as to make, for example, successful entrepreneurship and bureaucratic organization henceforth part of our repertory. This generally cannot be brought about without profound changes in our earlier way of life.

The point of the 'multiple modernities' thesis is that these adaptations don't have to and generally won't be identical across civilizations. Something is indeed converging here, while other things diverge. It might be tempting to say: the institutions and practices converge, while the cultures find new forms of differentiation. But that can only be a first approximation. Because in fact the institutional forms will also frequently be different.

Take the example just mentioned of entrepreneurship. This is a condition of successful participation in a market economy, itself a condition of economic growth, and hence welfare and/or power. But it is clear that the entrepreneurial cultures of Japan, Chinese societies, the Indian merchant castes and groups differ from each other and from those of the West. Indeed, business cultures differ even between the societies of the Atlantic region, as Francis Fukuyama has persuasively argued.[3] But with the cultures also go differences in form: in size of firm, basis of trust within it, its modes of procedure, et cetera. These forms-and-cultures will be more or less successful in different circumstances, and they may thus keep tabs on each other, and even try to borrow; but this doesn't mean that they can or will converge.

We have to remember that what is required by the 'wave' of modernity is that one should come up not with identical institutions but with functionally equivalent ones. The 'bottom line' is, for example, competing successfully in the international market. More than one kind of firm and business culture can enable this; as will more than one way of

forms. We are still looking for a language to understand this, to bridge differences, make comparative studies.

I have been trying to suggest in this chapter some directions in which we might look for the languages we need. I hope they will prove fruitful.

Notes

1. Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', ll. 21–8.
2. Oral communication by Rajeev Bhargava to the 'Alternative Modernities' seminar, held by the Centre for Transcultural Studies, Delhi, December 1997.
3. See Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtue and the Creation of Prosperity*, New York: Free Press, 1996.
4. I have discussed this in 'Modernity and the Rise of the Public Sphere', in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Vol. 14, 1993, Salt Lake City: Utah University Press, pp. 203–60.
5. François Furet, *La Révolution française*, Paris, 1988.
6. This gap has been admirably traced by Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, London: Chatto, 1977.
7. See Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Sacre du citoyen*, Paris: Gallimard.
8. See especially Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1991, to which these reflections obviously owe a great deal.

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Reading Stuart Hall in Southern Africa

Keyan G. Tomaselli

Narrating the Crisis[1] was the title of a book on the South African news media under apartheid (Tomaselli *et al.* 1987). The source of this title is obviously a play on the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies's (BCCCS) landmark study, *Policing the Crisis*, edited by Stuart Hall *et al.* (1978).

Narrating the Crisis had followed the inauguration of *Critical Arts: A Journal for Media Studies* in 1980, where a group of anti-apartheid South African scholars sought to develop theories pertinent to a critique of South African media, drama and literature. None had then heard of BCCCS, let alone Stuart Hall. It was coincidentally through the Witwatersrand University History Workshop in 1981, around which radical historians, sociologists, literary and anthropological scholars coalesced, that its editors learned from some British scholars of BCCCS and *Policing the Crisis*. Some of us involved with *Critical Arts* had independently of BCCCS forged similar – if much less theorized, and inconsistent and fragmentary – approaches in our own studies. My discussion below will derive from the *Critical Arts* experience between 1980 and 1998.[2]

In 1985, the University of Natal, Durban, established the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit (CCSU). The stimulus for this initiative was the 16 June 1976 Soweto student uprising. A faculty–student committee realized that resistance in South Africa was failing, partly because two crucial sites of mobilization were absent domestically: media and culture. These sites had been so effectively colonized in the service of apartheid that even liberal anthropologists were wary of teaching 'cultural anthropology'. CCSU's mandate was to work with anti-apartheid organisations (see Tomaselli 1988; NeSmith 1988). Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson had been consulted by the committee on using the Birmingham model.

It was most fitting, then, that Stuart Hall was able to participate in a conference organized in Durban by our renamed Centre for Cultural