

## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE NATURE OF EARLY MODERN SOCIETY

(Talk given to early modern seminar, Cambridge, Jan. 1992, Alan Macfarlane; written December 1991)

### A ROUGH CATEGORIZATION OF MODERNITY

Pre-modern: hunter-gatherer (neolithic), tribal (Paleolithic), ancient (Egypt, Rome, India etc)

Modern: early modern (essential features, minus industrialization)  
modern (social and political system plus industrialization)

Post-modern: modernity plus new communications technology etc.

Among the questions here would be: which side of the divide does one put feudal societies; how early does a society become modern; can one describe Tocqueville's 'Ancien Regime' societies as early modern or 'Ancient' etc. etc.

Among the dangers is the tendency to see an inevitable movement in one direction - march of progress etc. But probably better to start with Gellner (in Baechler, Europe, 3) in believing that modern society is a miracle: "We are an aberration, which can only be understood by investigating the other, more typical social forms".

Also the danger to see 'modernity' as synonymous with recentness, ie. to align chronological and social time. Necessary to be able to conceive of Greece in the 5th century B.C. as 'early modern' and C18 Spain as 'Ancient' etc.

### SOME FEATURES OR INDICES OF MODERNITY

#### **Social structure and stratification**

This is probably what De Tocqueville took as the most important index of modernity - ie. equality, or potential mobility. Classes yes, but caste no. A society based on achievement, not ascription etc. Possibility of upward and downward movement.

"In England, where at the first view it might be thought that the ancient constitution of Europe was still in full vigour, this was not the case. Shutting your eyes to the old names and forms, you will find from the seventeenth century the feudal system substantially abolished, classes which overlap, nobility of birth set on one side, aristocracy thrown open, wealth as the source of power, equality before the law, office open to all, liberty of the press, publicity of debate...Seventeenth-century England was already a quite modern nation, which has merely preserved in its heart, and as sit were

embalmed, some relics of the Middle Ages." (Ancien, 21).

Most 'ancien regime' societies based on the four orders - priests, warriors, townsmen, peasants. Modernity consists of the breaking down of this into numerous occupational groups, ranked but mobile. Usually the 'peasants' constitute the huge bulk of the population - illiterate and immobile etc. , while in 'modern' societies it is the 'middling' sort who contain the bulk of the population.

It is normally thought, with De Tocqueville, that this had happened in England by the fourteenth century or earlier, and likewise in Holland. As De Tocqueville wrote:

"It was far less its Parliament, its liberty, its publicity, its jury, which in fact rendered the England of that date so unlike the rest of Europe, than a feature still more exclusive and more powerful. England was the only country in which the system of caste had been not changed by effectively destroyed....Whenever the feudal system established itself on the continent of Europe it ended in caste; in England alone it returned to aristocracy." (Ancien, 89). (But doubters - Stone, Jonathan Clark etc.)

### **Movement from status to contract**

Another way of putting the change is from a society based on 'status' (that is birth, kinship, blood) to one based on 'contract' (that is achievement, will, intellect etc), along the lines of Maine, Tonnies and others. Using this criteria, a number of societies (e.g. early feudal ones) have been 'modern' very early on. We probably feel awkward about labelling them thus because we expect to find a whole package of features, and this, though perhaps the crucial one, is only one.

### **Movement from the group to the individual**

Yet another way of putting the same fundamental contrast is to contrast societies based on the group ('holistic' in Dumont's sense) to those based on the individual. Vinogradoff thought this was the major contrast between Ancient and Modern:

"The most profound difference between modern and ancient organization consists in the fact that modern society starts from individuals and adjusts itself primarily to the claims of the individual, whereas ancient society starts from groups and subordinates individual interests to the claims of these groups."  
(in Krader, Law, 57 )

Or more recently, as Daniel Bell put it (Contradictions, 16):

"the fundamental assumption of modernity...is that the social unit of society is not the group, the guild, the tribe or the city, but the person".

The basis question here is whether an individual has independent legal rights - in property for

instance. Again there are signs of such property individualism very early in England.

### **Absence of peasantry**

The central feature of ancien regime societies is that they are agrarian, based on the countryside. And in this countryside the basic unit of production and consumption is the family - what is called the Domestic Mode of Production. This is basically what we mean by a 'peasantry'. This was a world which lasted in France until peasants were turned into Frenchmen in the second half of the nineteenth century. But that essential split between the social unit of reproduction ( the family) and the economic unit of production (the farm worker etc.) is a necessary feature of 'modernity'. It had happened early in England and as Habakkuk long ago pointed out, the English peasant had disappeared long before the eighteenth century. Its importance was stressed by Weber as the essence of capitalism:

Basic pre-requisite for modern capitalism - "the separation of business from the household, which completely dominates modern economic life..." (Weber, Protestant, 21-2)

### **Geographical mobility**

"Le Village Immobile", from cradle to grave in one place etc., is often a feature of 'Ancien Regime' societies. High geographical mobility, with most people ending up away from where they were born is a sign of modernity. Again, now thought to be an old pattern in England.

### **Demographic regime**

The 'Malthusian' or 'crisis' pattern is characteristic of most ancien regime societies - where there are surges and crises, where population is basically controlled, with maximum fertility and low age at marriage, by high perennial or periodic death rates. War, famine and disease the main controls. In a 'modern' regime, fertility is controlled, usually with late and selective marriage and fertility control, and is sensitive to economic change. Again, widely thought to have switched from one to the other in England by the later fifteenth century at the latest.

### **Economic growth**

Here modernity is shown by a sustained growth in GNP and personal wealth. This is what struck Adam Smith about Europe when he compared it to China in the eighteenth century.

"China is a much richer country than any part of Europe..." (Wealth, i, 211)

"The poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpassed that of the most beggarly nations in Europe..." (Wealth, i, 80-1); China thought to be stationery in wealth between fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. (Wealth, i, 80); "The greater part of Europe being in an improving state, while China seems to be standing still". (Wealth, i, 211)

Year by year agricultural and proto-industrial production was increasing net and individual wealth. There is plenty of evidence that this was again the case from at least the fifteenth century in England.

### **Technological growth**

This economic growth is related to sustained technological improvement, particularly in the application of new forms of power (first wind and water, later coal) to the process of production. But many other forms of technological growth, the compass, gunpowder, clock, glass etc. to name just a few.

### **Scientific and open universe obeying laws**

Behind this lay the most important factor - the discovery of the method of discovery, and its open use. What is often called the Baconian revolution. That is to say, the growing belief in the orderliness of nature and its susceptibility to investigation and testing and experiment. This would later be systematised through the laboratory revolution, when industrial methods were applied to science in the later nineteenth century. But well before that, the world lay open to man's classification and investigation and there were no, or very few, forbidden areas.

Put in another way, as Bertrand Russell put it:

" The period of history which is commonly called 'modern' has a mental outlook which differs from that of the mediaeval period in many ways. Of these, two are the most important: the diminishing authority of the Church, and the increasing authority of science. " (Russell, Philosophy, 511)

Or, in the words of Lewis Mumford,

"Second only to the creation of language: the technique of creating a neutral world of fact as distinguished from the raw data of immediate experience was the great general contribution of modern analytic science. This contribution was possibly second only to the development of our original language concepts...The concept of a neutral world, untouched by man's efforts, indifferent to his activities, obdurate to his wish and supplication, is one of the great triumphs of man's imagination, and in itself it represents a fresh human value..." (Mumford, Technics, 361)

### **Political openness**

A feature of most 'Ancien Regime' societies is that political pluralism is not allowed, they follow some form of absolutism, with a divine monarchy etc. "L'Etat c'est moi". Without going as far as full democracy, a feature of 'modernity' is the balanced constitution, with countervailing power blocks, limited monarchy or government based on some kind of contract etc. This is again a feature of English and Dutch society from at least the fourteenth century if not earlier.

## **Religious tolerance**

In 'Ancien Regime' societies the religious system tends to be both all-pervasive and closed. There is usually a concordat between State and Church so that heresy is punished by death and all thought is controlled through some form of Inquisition. The growth of sects and differing religious opinions, from the Lollards to the Quakers, is a pre-cursor of the religious pluralism which we take as one of the hall-marks of modernity. Agnosticism, the suspended religious judgment, are its concomitants. Again, the Dutch and English displayed this trait early on, but in France Voltaire was still not sure of its triumph in the later eighteenth century.

## **Disenchantment of the world**

In the 'Ancien Regime' people lived in an enchanted world, ruled by religion and magic and ritual. When Hobbes spoke of the canons of the English civil war killing the last fairy, he referred to the final stages of this disenchantment about which Keith Thomas has written. The disassociation of sensibility, separation of this world and the next, purification and attack on magic of the Puritans, are all parts of that separation of the natural from the supernatural which we take as a part of 'modernity'.

## **Rational bureaucracy**

This is a feature emphasized by Weber. Its features are well known; the development of universal rules, the separation of person and office, the decline of bribery and corruption, the adjustment of means and ends. Although not approaching the ideal type, there are widespread efforts towards this end in local administration and the law in England from at least the thirteenth century.

## **Predictable and universal law.**

There are several features here which are taken as indexes of modernity. Firstly, there is the 'rule of law', that is to say that disputes should be settled by due legal process and not by other methods (private war, feud, duels, witchcraft etc.). Secondly, there is the idea of equality before the law - that all citizens have certain inalienable rights which should be protected by the State, and which inhere in them as individuals, not because they are rich, old, male or whatever. Thirdly, there is the idea of a common or universal law, which prevails over all of a country, and is not restricted by powerful local exceptions. All three of these features and others are evident in England from very early on.

## **Use of abstract symbolic instruments: money**

One aspect of a world where everything is levelled onto the same plane is the widespread use of money.

Money - "with all its colourlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all

values, irreparably it hollows out the core of things their individuality, their specific value, and their incompatibility". (Simmel, Metropolis, 414)

Money is a symbolic instrument which allows the transfer of values across time and space, the accumulation and easier application of capital, the transformation of a use economy into an exchange economy etc. Thus a sophisticated money economy, where almost everything can be expressed in monetary values and where the remotest region is penetrated by cash, is a sign of 'modernity'. Again, there is evidence of this in Holland and England from very early on.

**Use of abstract symbolic instruments: literacy**

Curiously similar to money is writing - which instead of storing wealth, stores information and power and allows its more powerful manipulation in time and space. Widespread literacy and a growing use of the new technology of the printing press are signs of modernity. Both are features, permeating widely through the countryside, in England and Holland from the sixteenth century at least.

"In the 19th century when Charles Babbage, the inventor of the first true calculating machine, wrote that **the modern world commences with the printing press** he was merely echoing the many 16th and 17th century writers who ranked printing, together with geographical discover, among the main heralds of their new age. ....(p.112) The printing press helped spread both rationalism and dogmatism, both science and religion...Even so eminently civilized a technology as the printing press is ethically neutral. " (Birdsall, Technology, 111)

AN IDEAL TYPE TABLE OR CHECK LIST OF MODERNITY

Modern in terms of....	C18 France	England	Japan
Social stratification	no	yes	yes
From status to contract	no	yes	yes
From group to individual	?	yes	no
Absence of peasantry	no	yes	?
Geographical mobility	no	yes	yes
Demographic regime	no	yes	yes
Economic growth	no	yes	yes

Technological growth	?	yes	?
Scientific and open	no	yes	no
Politically open	no	yes	yes/no
Religious tolerance	no	yes	yes/no
Disenchantment of world	no	yes	yes/no
Rational bureaucracy	no	yes/no	yes/no
Predictable and universal law	no	yes	yes/no
Use of money	no	yes	yes
Widespread literacy	no	yes	yes

## **CENTRAL CORE OF MODERNITY; THE SEPARATION OF SPHERES**

There is a belief that 'modernity' derives from seventeenth century and consists in dissociation of politics, religion and society. "Political thought no longer appeared in a religious context and religion itself became differentiated from the social activities it had once mediated..." (Appleby, Economic, 24)

"In the classical world, as Hegel had pointed out, there is no distinction between the social and the political, between society and the state..." But - "In modern society, there is a fundamental distinction between state and society..." quotes Marx on. (Bell, Post-Industrial Society, 130)

Separation of law and morality - one of central features of 'modern' conditions - Kant. (Bell, Contradictions, 274)

Gesellschaft - "Everything in principle becomes saleable, alienable, exchangeable. The economic is divorced from the social, political, the religious and treated in its own abstract terms..." (Kamenka in Kamenka and Neale, Feudalism, 137)

## **POST-MODERNITY**