

MODERN MATTERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that modernity is a historical sense, a sense of the times, a sense of the era. It is a feeling that the times themselves have changed, and the sense of the modern is the sense of the changed character of the whole of the very dispensation in which we live and move and have our being. At its root, it is a millenarian sense, whether for the better or worse, of a world passed or passing away, and a new one with its changed challenges and satisfactions already come or coming into being to claim our attention and efforts. Dominating the modern intellectual environment are the sciences and arts of the Europeans setting the pace for what takes place and the vision of what the future holds.

Keywords: Modernity, rationality, history, progress, freedom, equality.

Modernity, modernism and modernization are simultaneously matters of our voluntary action and altogether beyond our control. Beyond our control because though they may not concern us ourselves, they do concern also others with whom we have to live and who are of intimate concern to us in the conduct of our lives. But for most of us, the modern is a matter of intimate concern and something essential to the choices with which we are faced, to the issues we confront in large matters and in small. The modern, even though it is a thing of the mind, a cast of the imagination, faces us everywhere as a palpable reality with which we must cope, if indeed we are not modernists ourselves and altogether committed to some allegiance or the other of a missionary modernization. The modern is our ownmost ghost in the issues of our attitudes and orientations to ourselves and to each other, and indeed to the world, the universe, the whole of what faces us and indeed constitutes our very own being.

Modernity is a historical sense, a sense of the times, a sense of the era. It is a feeling that the times themselves have changed, well beyond the ways in which every day is a new day, every circumstance demanding judgement altogether unprecedented and not to be encompassed by an already formulated rule, a summary principle which already holds all the answers. The sense of the modern is the sense of the changed character of the whole of the very dispensation in which we live and move and have our being. At its root, it is a millenarian sense, whether

for the better or worse, of a world passed or passing away, and a new one with its changed challenges and satisfactions already come or coming into being to claim our attention and efforts. Such a change as is entailed in the end of a yuga and the beginning of a new one. Such a change as is inaugurated in India with the advent of Buddhism and Jainism, when Ârya dharma turns defensive and first feels the need to engage in missionary effort, to proselytize. Such a change as is marked by the establishment of European rule in India, with its alien thought and wisdom. Such a change as shakes the imagination itself.

In the popular imagination, the word modern has come to be associated with the turn in thinking that is associated with the European advent. Fairly rapidly, our ways of life have been transformed and a new order, incorporating both native and European elements has been well on the way for almost two centuries. There are some for whom the pace of modernization is not rapid enough. There are some for whom modern ways seem unsuited to our circumstances, and who wish for a path of development more amenable to our own discrimination. There are some who using modern techniques wish to carve out an independent future to rival that of European civilization. There are some who seek an independent indigenous ground of thinking in which we can be masters of ourselves and not just a late-comer into the practice of European ways. Dominating the modern intellectual environment are the sciences and arts of the Europeans setting the pace for what takes place and the vision of what the future holds.

European opinion on what the future holds is divided between a popular enthusiastic optimism, and a superior critical pessimism. At the same time, as the Utopian imagination refuses to be fazed by the disastrous unintended consequences of missionary modernizations, the dystopic vision laments the unimprovability of human kind and the unthinking destruction of the very sources of our well-being and humanity. To be sure, everyday life carries on apace, but under the veneer of civility and peace, passions seethe setting one against the other and each against all as the very structure and substance of this everyday. Despite increasing affluence and the multiplication of amenities available to such affluence, life does not seem to be getting easier, rather more difficult, and anxieties and hatred and intolerance increasing rather than decreasing.

Most sophisticated modernists have an ambivalent attitude to modernity itself. Whereas in sum they are committed to programmes of modernization, and tend to see in modernity the promise of the realization

of the age-old hopes of humanity, they are alive to the deleterious effects of the modern, and the unacceptable transformation of the ways of life that it displaces. Whether it is Marx or Weber or Durkheim, the modern comes with its own baggage of the disastrous which has to be somehow contained or transcended. But all commentators tend to see the passage of modernity as inevitable, and indeed the face of the future, whether desirable or undesirable. The valorization of modernity is almost invariably yoked to a metaphysics of history, that sees human and not infrequently cosmic history as unfolding in a grand panoply of progress, and that castigates any wish or attempt at conservative and anti-modern undertakings as a ridiculous and futile effort to turn the clock back, a retrogressive development that needs to be completely extirpated. The turn in thinking that modernity betokens is almost invariably extolled in the rhetoric of the partisan as an Enlightenment, and modernists are ever eager to take up the cudgels against the non-modern as myths and superstition.

The attempt to root out myths and superstition is a characteristic feature of modern European thought. It is the agon that fires the modernist intellectual urge and that has been instituted in the educational systems all over the world, knitting the vocabulary of the various nations into a world-wide lingua franca in which one must necessarily speak in order to be taken seriously and to be considered educated. Myth is understood as the alter of philosophy and the distinction goes back to ancient Greece and Rome. Superstition is understood as the alter of true religion and goes back to medieval Christianity. In keeping with this, modernists tend to see themselves as governed by a rationality, a rationality the like of which has never been seen before. True enough, modernists can also be Romantics, valorizing beauty, emotion and the non-rational elements of human personality, but the ways in which they elaborate these and indeed in the nature of their commitment to such a life, they take care not to overstep the prejudices and boundaries of the European sciences.

The Europeans have instituted a whole discipline called the philosophy of science to explore the distinctive peculiarities of the way of thinking that is entailed in the sciences. It is presumed in this project that science is a distinctive way of thinking different from all others, and the discipline hopes to be able to isolate it and so to set it apart from all other ways of thinking. The exercise is an epistemological one and as the European philosopher Martin Heidegger has pointed out epistemology is transcendental metaphysics in disguise. Under the guise

of an abstract enquiry into the ways through which we know and the attempt to characterize valid ways of knowing, the philosopher advances in sum his or her own prejudices as to the nature of Reality. All that can be definitively advanced about the premises underlying the European sciences is a methodological atheism, a repudiation of the divine and the supernatural in the process of explanation, and a sharp distinction between facts and values. Thus it is that scientists and philosophers and indeed those in the public at large who take the European sciences as their model of thinking, argue an atheism and the extirpation of emotion and passion from our way of thinking. The European philosopher Karl Popper has however argued that scientists themselves are however human beings and so, emotional and passionate creatures and emotion and passion enter into their scientific pursuit, and dispassionateness and objectivity accrue through the mutual criticism and discussion of their work by the community of scientists. Though there is much to be said in favour of a methodological atheism in the inquiry into natural phenomena, a methodological device hardly qualifies as an argument in the nature of this reality itself.

For most of the rest of the world the success of the European sciences in producing technological marvels is the most powerful of the arguments advanced in favour of following the West. But, European superiority and the claim to it resides not only in the European sciences and their technological accomplishment but in the culture and cultivation from which these have arisen. And where science is admired and emulated, equally the culture of the West has disseminated all over the world and influenced and influences the course of development of all of the rest of the world. European modernism and modernity provides the model for the changes initiated in the life and practices of the nations of the world at large. And the most powerful modern word is not indeed science, but the motor that drives the emotions and passions of modern aspirations – freedom!

Freedom is understood variously in various cultures and the European and western understanding interprets freedom as primarily political and social. Modern programmes of political and social emancipation are many and varied. Isms proliferate and the ismic mentality itself generates a bind in which the partisan modernizer is trapped. That is not to say that the modern aspiration to the freedom of thought, its expression and action is a hollow claim. But freedom, is not achieved by a one-sided attempt to claim freedom by those who consider themselves bound or enslaved, but the surrender of those in

authority curtailing these to the claims of the person wishing to be free. By far, the most important dimension of freedom is the degree to which parents and adults permit children the privilege in their conduct. Similarly, as adult citizens, people are bound by custom and laws and the degree to which these permit the free exercise of initiatives is a variable feature conditioned by the nature of the authority exercising constraint. However, the aspiration to an unconstrained life and the unchecked enjoyment of whatever it may be that circumstances have to offer is an explosive force in the unfolding of personal and social relations. Unfettered existence is perhaps the most powerful of urges in the logic and realization of desires and wishes. This is not to deny the overwhelming importance of responsibilities and duties, but even within the ambit of blameless behaviour, freedom and the wild passion for its realization functions as a goad urging humanity to unprecedented effort and achievement. This, to my mind is perhaps the most important dimension of European modernity, touching all lives all over the globe.

It could be argued that it is modernity itself that first creates the fetters that it latterly pits itself against. Yet, even so, the urge to freedom is an empowering experience well beyond the circumstances of containment within which it is enclosed and against which it marshals its energies. And freedom never loses its edge, no matter the degree to which emancipation is already achieved. Though it is only in a relative sense that social and political battles are fought and social and political emancipation achieved, the peremptory and encompassing urge to freedom itself is Absolute. Indic thought of course posits the absolute realization of this absolute urge in the transcendence of karma and the release from the cycle of birth and death that it sees as the fundamental human predicament. Marxian and leftist thought, within the ambit of modern European and Europeanized thought tends to inject this absoluteness into its relative pursuits and at its atheistic apogee invokes the Paradisiacal transformation of its earthly predicament.

Usually, in the interpretation of freedom by modernists, considerations of equality are inextricably intertwined. Simmel has pointed out that equality and freedom are often opposed to each other and at contradictory cross purposes to each other. But at the same time as egalitarianism is a characteristically modern value, equality is not infrequently conflated in the usage of modernist thinkers with freedom. Whether it is Rousseau or Marx, the logic of emancipation is identified with egalitarian premises. That is not to say that there are no modernist

thinkers who separate the two. But certainly, in popular and customary academic usage the two go together.

No matter where we go, and from birth to death, hierarchy is the rule. Society is impossible without it and each one of us desires the highest and the best for themselves. Beteille has tried to argue that what we find in nature is only difference, whereas hierarchy is a product of human evaluation. The contention flies in the face of the ordering of nature, and forgets that egalitarianism itself is a valuation. Besides, a human thinking that does not evaluate is perhaps altogether impossible.

Considerations of the inevitability of hierarchy have led to a situation where egalitarians no longer speak of equality but have invented a word to house their egalitarian aspiration within the ambit of necessary and unavoidable hierarchy – equity. Within the ambit of a modernist and modernizing thinking the only salutary form of hierarchy has been advanced as a meritocracy. Radical egalitarians and realists dispute the possibility of such a form of hierarchy, but in the institutional practices of contemporary societies with egalitarian prejudices it is indeed the evaluation by some form of merit that guides the conscious administration of privilege. The customary form of the evaluation of merit is usually an examination by those in positions of authority. The egalitarian urge in society at large takes two opposed directions. The usual is the emulation of the higher by the lower, always accompanied by the attempt of the lower to denigrate the higher and to pull it down to its own level. The second, of course, is loaded with vindictive revolutionary potential, but is incapable by itself of instituting healthy and salutary social practices. This is not to say that there are no senses in which we are equal. But these tend to be transcendental, even though they have implications for the ways in which we conduct ourselves with respect to each other.

Individuals differ in the degree to which they have adopted modernist orientations. At its deepest level modernism is a spirit of all-round change including change in the apperception of the spirit itself. It is a change in spiritual and aesthetic values which affects the ways in which the world and our relationships are perceived. It is potent with a changed aesthetics and changes ethics. And this is the sense in which it is possible to suggest a shift away from modernism to a post-modernity. It is not as if the modernist spirit has passed away but that it is assimilated to a more inclusive point of view than the peremptory radical mission of modernizing.

Modernity and modernism continue to fire the imagination of many and equally the characteristically modern hostility to modernity. Contrasting moral values are pitted against each other, and the intolerance entailed breeds persecution and oppression. Though persecution and oppression are nowhere and at no time admired values, the sense of the defence of values that *are* admired and extolled tends to be used to justify the use of coercion and violence. Though peace is near universal in its appeal, war is an inevitable expedient of the human condition. A morality that rises above both and assimilates the virtues of both war and peace into its own internal dynamic is not only the superior dharma taught by spiritually accomplished persons, no matter when, no matter where, but the need of the hour. There have been many exemplars in the past. It remains to be seen how *we* will face the challenge of cataclysm that is impending, and how humanity will fare in this great trial of itself.

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