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*Modernity and its Discontents*

Taylor, Charles. 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Charles Taylor's work has been almost single-mindedly oriented to understanding the development of European modernity and the self-critiques that are themselves a crucial aspect of modernity. The book under review is no exception. He describes its focus directed to the 'social imaginaries' of modernity (2). Neither a straight-forward history of ideas nor of institutions, the social imaginary refers to those ideas which are effective in a society due to their links to institutions past, present or emergent. The notion of the economy, for example, as a self-regulating sphere of production, circulation and consumption distinct from politics and the family is a constitutive feature of modern society, not merely an opinion or theory about it, nor, strictly speaking, an institution itself. It is what makes the institution possible and generates ideas in the minds of social actors. This concept of a social imaginary is not new, of course, but it is a shift for Taylor away from the history of philosophy toward what might call the 'effective history' of ideas. Even so, this is largely a matter of emphasis insofar as his major earlier work was intended not only to show the influence of the modern identity on philosophy but also to "comprehend the momentous transformations of our culture and society over the last three or four centuries" (1989:ix).

For Taylor, as for others for whom this approach has been employed, it is a way around the materialist-idealist dead-end toward a conception in which ideas and institutions mutually determine each other and thus must be investigated in their historical specificity.

The social imaginary of modernity is a moral order, according to Taylor, which came into being through the idea of the social contract in Grotius and Locke, and which has expanded in both extension and intensity up to the present day. The social contract imagines society as an agreement between individuals who come together to form a civil society in order to attain the security and well-being of each and all its members. The focus on Grotius and Locke is a selection with consequences. One wonders why Hobbes and Spinoza are absent given their much more significant contributions to the foundation of social contract theory. This selection allows Taylor to present social contract theory in a way that minimizes its potential justification of the absolutist state and its contest with religion and therefore as necessarily (in the long run) undermining the ‘hierarchical complementarity’ of the pre-modern order with the ‘impersonal equality’ of modernity.

This analysis of modernity clearly puts Taylor on the side of those who define modernity through its ethical and political innovation. The main competing analysis is that which defines modernity through the change in science from Aristotelian physics to the modern mechanical science of nature and its inherent connection to technology. Both of these must somehow be taken into account in any thoroughgoing definition of modernity, but in practice it is usual to begin from one and regard the other as more or less its consequence. Thus, when Taylor does mention Heidegger’s influential definition of modernity as ‘the age of the world picture,’ he does so only to roll it into the notion of an ‘impersonal system’ that he regards as a consequence of the modern moral order (158). The other major feature of early modernity—the emergence of perspective in art—while it is

clearly related to the modern notion of the individual as a perspective on the whole, finds no place in the analysis at all. We are given a political theorist's version of modernity and no argument to justify why this should be taken for modernity as such.

Taylor narrates a history in which, while beginning as a rather radical and marginal idea, the new moral order expanded in three main dimensions to produce the modern institutions of the economy, the public sphere and politics as democratic self-rule (69). Much of *Modern Social Imaginaries* is given over to the development of these institutions, and the great majority of this narrative is in no part unique. It rests upon and repeats with only minor variation classic accounts by Weber, Durkheim and Constant and draws strongly on recent influential studies by Habermas, Jaspers, Kantorowicz, Furet, Rosanvallon, Benedict Anderson, etc. The only distinctive feature which I can find in this narration is the claim that the modern moral order consists in "the affirmation of ordinary life" (102) which had already been a main argument of Taylor's prior *Sources of the Self* where he claimed that "the full human life is now defined in terms of labour and production, on the one hand, and marriage and family life, on the other. At the same time, the previous 'higher' activities come under vigorous criticism" (1989:213).

The three modern institutions of economy, the public sphere and popular sovereignty become separated from the social order as a whole. In Habermas's more precise terms, they become 'subsystems' differentiated from the lifeworld. "These systemic interconnections, detached from normative contexts and rendered independent as subsystems, challenge the assimilative powers of an all-encompassing lifeworld. They congeal into the 'second nature' of a norm-free sociality that can appear as something in the objective world, as an *objectified* context of life" (1987:173). It is not clear in what sense the public sphere and popular sovereignty can be considered 'self-regulating (sub)systems'

comparable to the economy. Their arguable separation, or differentiation, from the social system as a whole does not necessarily imply that they are 'self-regulating.' A subsystem may have sufficient autonomy to run according to its internal rules and not be directly subservient to those of the whole social order and yet require occasional, or even continuous, intervention from that order to remain viable. Taylor's narrative is considerably less precise than Habermas' theory on this point. It is arguable that the exemplary case for a 'self-regulating subsystem' is the economy, even though it is certainly not the only one.

This is, of course, the classic dispute between Marxists and Weberians. Both Taylor and Habermas are Weberians in the sense that they do not regard the economy as especially significant in the differentiation of modernity. However, there is a further point at which Taylor's account (and also Habermas' but that is beyond my purpose here) can be found wanting. The upshot of Taylor's narrative of modernity is the final replacement in our own time of the residues of pre-modern moral order by the 'direct-access society' which has become an all-pervasive order. The completed modern moral order is constituted in secular time, that is, a time which is shorn of any public reference to the transcendental time of God, cosmos, or Being. Such a society is simultaneous and horizontal such that each member is "immediate to the whole" (157) in clear distinction from pre-modern moral orders which were hierarchical, rooted in sacred time, and in which the relation of each to the whole was mediated by personal dependence on others. For this reason, pre-modern moral orders can be described as relations of 'hierarchical complementarity,' whereas the modern moral order is one of 'impersonal equality.' But note that this narrative of extension of an egalitarian moral order does not enter the economic sphere itself. Indeed, the condition for the notion of a self-regulating economy is that labour (in Marxist terms, labour power) is considered as one economic cost among others. This being so, the worker cedes

autonomy to those who control the labour process. The conditions of wage labour remain those of command, not egalitarian morality. Taylor points out that there is neither common decision nor a public domain in economic transaction, but that still “it is a ‘sphere’ because the agents in an economy are seen as being linked in a single society, in which their actions reciprocally affect each other in some systematic way” (104). But, surely, agents are often linked in hierarchical and complementary relations of command. Such was the case, as Taylor points out, in pre-Revolutionary French rule (71). Taylor seems constitutionally blind to, not only the persistence of command relations, but the extent to which they are rooted in the notion of a ‘self-regulating economy’ and thus at the core of modern differentiation. This is, of course, a key question raised by Marxism, especially that variety that emphasizes the production process (rather than the ‘anarchy of the market’) as the central element of capitalism. Taylor’s off-hand remarks about Marxism refer only to the base-superstructure model, in order to reject ‘materialist’ determination of the social imaginary (32-3, 72-3), and to ill-fated attempts to subsume the economy to state control (171). But here is a pervasive fact that his own analysis cannot logically avoid: the worker and the capitalist are not “immediate to the whole” in the same sense at all. The modern moral order stops at the factory gates. For all the contemporary reasons to revise or abandon Marxism, this basic fact should not be lost.

We have come to expect from Taylor not only a triumphalist account of the development of modernity but also a reckoning with critiques of modernity. As the title of his CBC Massey Lectures suggests, modernity is continually plagued by a ‘malaise’ of which he diagnosed three components: individualism, instrumental reason, and loss of freedom due to the predominance of large institutions (1991:2-10). *Modern Social Imaginaries* situates the malaise of modernity in similar, though not identical, fashion as the tension between

objectification and agency. The direct-access society brings forth both “new kinds of collective agency, those grounded in common action in secular time” and also requires being able to “grasp society as objectified, as a set of processes, detached from any agential perspective” (163). Such forms of collective agency are new because they arise from the coordinated efforts of free individuals and bear upon the society as a whole; they are not the action of previously-defined groups within relations of personal dependence (such as peasant movements or aristocratic self-assertion against the king). Significantly, Taylor makes no mention of the workers’ movement as a new form, and probably the first form, of modern collective agency.

The notion of society as constituted by objectified processes—like the self-regulating mechanism of the market, the bureaucratic features of government, or the techniques of mass marketing—also derives from the modern moral order. Taylor’s insistence on this point is one of the defining features of the book, though, again, it is not a departure in his thought. The basis for the common origin of objectification and agency is that “the political is limited by the extrapolitical, by different domains of life that have their own integrity and purpose” (164). This is so because the social contract conceives individuals as pre-existing civil society and civil society as thus an instrument for security and well-being. “[I]t is thus built into the modern social imaginary that it allows us to conceive of society in extrapolitical forms ... can be grasped and studied in various ways” (164-5). These “various ways,” however, turn out to be all similar insofar as they rely on objectified categories that do not treat their subjects as agents. This seems a thin and over-rapid explanation of the tension in modernity. As noted above, it passes over the command structure of production as if it were the same as the objectifying nature of the economic subsystem itself. He goes on to assert the even stronger thesis that “active and objective categories play complementary roles in

our lives. It is inconceivable that we could dispense with the second” (165). This claim is in continuity with Taylor’s account of critiques of modernity in his earlier work. “The trouble with most of the views that I consider inadequate [critics of modernity], and that I want to define mine in contrast to here, is that their sympathies are too narrow. They find their way through the dilemmas of modernity by invalidating some of the crucial goods in contest” (1989:502-3). “Governing a contemporary society is continually recreating a balance between requirements that tend to undercut each other, constantly finding new creative solutions as the old equilibria become stultifying” (1991:111). Since, he asserts, the critiques of modernity are made possible by modernity and depend on some of the same basic postulates as what they are criticizing, the critiques are internal critiques of modernity. They should thus aim at improving modernity, not at abandoning it for something else. Such a ‘something else’ is always conceived by Taylor as an in principle impossible attempt to return to features of pre-modern society that has the practical effect of succumbing to the ‘totalitarian temptation’ within modernity (171). The narrative thus mutes its triumphalism only slightly.

The tension between collective agency and objectifying processes is thus understood by Taylor as an ineradicable feature of the fully modern society due to its origin in the morality of the social contract. Political action, social analysis, and one supposes philosophy also, should recognize that modernity and the critics of modernity belong together and that the task is to balance them, to find some equilibrium which will always be temporary. This effort defines the pervasive Hegelianism of Taylor’s *oeuvre*: he seeks the mediation whereby the similarity in the two conflicting tendencies can be recognized and thus the tension can be drawn toward a balance rather than escalating toward a rupture. Like most contemporary Hegelians, he refuses a final *Aufhebung* in which the tension is resolved by being taken to a higher level and contents himself with a perpetual balancing act. Taylor is a philosopher of

the middle way. The practical implications of this position are social democratic, much like some current European governments or perhaps what Canada would look like if the NDP were in power.

This balancing act can be presented as such only by diminishing the scale of certain contemporary problems. *Modern Social Imaginaries* doesn't deal with such problems in anything but a general allusive manner since its orientation is to the history of modernity. *The Malaise of Modernity* dealt mainly with individualism to conclude that "like all forms of individualism and freedom, authenticity opens an age of responsabilization, if I can use this term. By the very fact that this culture develops, people are made more self-responsible" (1991:77). Similarly, the text under review suggests that "modern individualism, as a moral idea, doesn't mean ceasing to belong at all—that's the individualism of anomie and breakdown—but imagining oneself as belonging to ever wider and more impersonal entities: the state, the movement, the community of mankind" (160). The remedy for the *anomie* brought on by large bureaucratic institutions is thus engagement with the collective agency of exactly these same entities (albeit for their reform). Taylor doesn't see a problem here, but it seems markedly close to a moralizing exhortation to pull up one's socks and participate in modern institutions in the right spirit.

A similar diminution can be seen in his discussions of ecology. While in *Sources of the Self* he argued for the relevance of romantic identification with nature, he muted this philosophical sympathy by stating that "we are now in an age in which a publicly accessible cosmic order of meanings is an impossibility. The only way we can explore the order in which we are set with an aim to defining moral sources is through the art of personal resonance" (1989:512). The validity of even this diminished personal relevance was reduced further in *The Malaise of Modernity* to including those battling the disenchantment of nature as

simple “knockers” of technology and modernity (1991:94-5). In *Modern Social Imaginaries* the environmental effects of modern science and technology are simply not addressed. This diminution is necessary to Taylor’s account of modernity because it is precisely in such issues that the possibility of taming the tensions to which he refers seems highly questionable.

One way in which this question can be raised in a more fundamental manner is to observe that the relation of humans to nature is a non-reciprocal relation. While we may have moral obligations to preserve other natural beings, it is unlikely that they have such obligations to us. Hans Jonas described this as the general problem of ethics in our time. He began his analysis in the non-reciprocal obligation of parents for their children and argued for a consequent obligation to future generations (1984:108-22). While modernity has certainly changed the moral ideal toward which we attempt to educate our children, it is not the case that they can be treated as already the free and equal individuals that the social contract requires. “For it is the future of the whole existence, beyond the direct efficacy of the responsible agent and thus beyond his concrete calculation, which is the invisible co-object of such a responsibility in each of its single, defined occasions” (1984:107). Non-reciprocal relations of responsibility to children will not disappear even in the realized modernity of the direct-access society. Children will not have direct access and responsibility must be taken for bringing them to the stage of partaking in the moral ideal. In short, children and parents are not “immediate to the whole” in the same way.

But apart from this example, Jonas suggests that non-reciprocal relations are precisely those that need thinking about in realized modernity because they are concealed by the assumptions of the modern moral ideal. Perhaps it is relations of complementarity that need to be thought now. Modern morality tends to regard all complementary relations, because they are non-reciprocal, as hierarchical. Consider the relation of husband and wife in

a family. It is commonplace to argue that the previous hierarchical relation between husband ('man') and wife was oppressive in the name of modern equality. But is equality sameness? Can the relations of male and female be thoroughly just the relation of two 'individuals'? Contemporary sensitivity to difference suggests that equality and difference may be compatible and, if so, would be the basis for a new ethic that is both in a certain sense modern (because egalitarian) and in a certain sense pre-modern (because complementary). Indeed, perhaps the same issue of what we might call 'complementary egalitarianism' is at the ground of the ecology movement also. It is certainly at the basis of a genuine ethic of teaching. Democracy in the workplace would have to reckon with the complementary relations of the division of labour alongside egalitarian relations of self-management. It is this sort of question that Taylor's diminution of the tension in modernity is required to repress.

One constant of Taylor's defence of modernity is his refusal to consider atheism as an outcome of the realized modern ethic (recall the absence of Hobbes and Spinoza). He argues that the secularity of the modern moral ideal is a displacement of religion from its public role in connecting society to sacred time and not a rejection of religion as such. "God can seem the inescapable source for our power to impart order to our lives, both individually and socially" (193). Religion can survive as personal religion and also as an important aspect of political identity. *Sources of the Self* ended with the "promise of a divine affirmation of the human" (1989:521). In *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* he said that "a thoroughly post-Durkheimian society would be one in which our religious belonging would be unconnected to our national identity" and then proceeded to find three ways in which this is not likely to come to pass: the persistence of churches, the role of religion in some national identities, and as a personal spiritual quest (2002: 111-6).

The recurrence of the identical concern in penultimate chapter of *Modern Social Imaginaries* suggests that this theme carries more weight in Taylor's account than is immediately apparent. The tension between collective agency and objectifying processes in realized modernity poses a question of where the motive for collection action comes from. Well, in the first place from the individual self-interest inherent in the social contract, of course. But Taylor is not satisfied with this. He has consistently argued that such individualism is not the whole of modernity and that new forms of collective action are generated that can balance the tendency of individual self-interest. Such collective action requires "horizons of significance" (1991:37-40) but such horizons cannot be generated by individual self-interest. What, then, can generate them? When *Modern Social Imaginaries* encounters this problem, Taylor turns to a discussion of fashion as a system of display. He remarks that "just because these spaces hover on the boundary between solitude and togetherness, they may sometimes flip over into common action" (2004:169). Such exciting 'flips' incite "as much cause for fear and hope in these wild, kairotic moments" mainly due to the experience of fascist spectacles (2004:170). At this point he refers to Durkheim, who saw such moments of collective ecstasy as "founding moments of the society and the sacred" (2004:169).

Religion remains in the picture for Taylor because it is the only way he can explain the flip from objectifying processes into collective action. While he maintains that modernity pushes religion out of the public realm, it nevertheless seems that it is something like collective religious experience that rescues the possibility of collective action and saves modernity from simply becoming objectification. To this extent, the description of the modern ethic as publicly secular is at best partial and at worst misleading. It is this misdescription that is at the root of Taylor's diminution of contemporary social issues and his

tendency to slip into exhortation. A better bet might be to admit the persistence of cosmic and natural experiences and the possibility, though difficult, of their entering the public domain. Though, in this case, one would have to reckon also with the absolutist (totalitarian?) claims of the modern state as well (not as a fascist exception, but as a central modern tendency). The condition for a more fundamental entry into these issues might well be the development of an ethic of complementary egalitarianism that is ruled out by Taylor's narrative of modernity and its discontents.

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