

MODERN SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

CHARLES TAYLOR



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Modern Social Imaginaries



p u b l i c p l a n e t b o o k s

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Charles Taylor

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To Wanda

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Modern Social Imaginaries

Introduction

From the beginning, the number one problem of modern social science has been modernity itself: that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality); and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution).

In our day, the problem needs to be posed from a new angle: Is there a single phenomenon here, or do we need to speak of “multiple modernities,” the plural reflecting the fact that other non-Western cultures have modernized in their own way and cannot properly be understood if we try to grasp them in a general theory that was designed originally with the Western case in mind?

This book explores the hypothesis that we can throw some light on both the original and the contemporary issues about modernity if we can come to a clearer definition of the self-understandings that have been constitutive of it. Western modernity on this view is inseparable from a certain kind of social imaginary, and the differences among today’s multiple

modernities need to be understood in terms of the divergent social imaginaries involved.

This approach is not the same as one that might focus on the “ideas,” as against the “institutions,” of modernity. The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society. This crucial point is expanded in chapter 3.

2 My aim here is a modest one. I would like to sketch an account of the forms of social imaginary that have underpinned the rise of Western modernity. My focus is on Western history, which leaves the variety of today’s alternative modernities untouched. But I hope that some closer definition of the Western specificity may help us see more clearly what is common among the different paths of contemporary modernization. In writing this, I have obviously drawn heavily on the pioneering work of Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities*,¹ as well as on work by Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner and on that of Pierre Rosanvallon and others, which I shall acknowledge as the argument unfolds.

My basic hypothesis is that central to Western modernity is a new conception of the moral order of society. This was at first just an idea in the minds of some influential thinkers, but it later came to shape the social imaginary of large strata, and then eventually whole societies. It has now become so self-evident to us that we have trouble seeing it as one possible conception among others. The mutation of this view of moral order into our social imaginary is the coming to be of certain social forms, which are those essentially characterizing Western modernity: the market economy, the public sphere, and the self-governing people, among others.

1 The Modern Moral Order

start with the new vision of moral order. This was most clearly stated in the new theories of Natural Law which emerged in the seventeenth century, largely as a response to the domestic and international disorder wrought by the wars of religion. Grotius and Locke are the most important theorists of reference for our purposes here.

Grotius derives the normative order underlying political society from the nature of its constitutive members. Human beings are rational, sociable agents who are meant to collaborate in peace to their mutual benefit.

Starting in the seventeenth century, this idea has come more and more to dominate our political thinking and the way we imagine our society. It starts off in Grotius's version as a theory of what political society is, that is, what it is in aid of, and how it comes to be. But any theory of this kind also offers inescapably an idea of moral order: it tells us something about how we ought to live together in society.

The picture of society is that of individuals who come together to form a political entity against a certain preexisting moral background and with certain ends in view. The moral background is one of natural rights; these people already have certain moral obligations toward each other. The ends sought

are certain common benefits, of which security is the most important.

The underlying idea of moral order stresses the rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other, even prior to or outside of the political bond. Political obligations are seen as an extension or application of these more fundamental moral ties. Political authority itself is legitimate only because it was consented to by individuals (the original contract), and this contract creates binding obligations in virtue of the preexisting principle that promises ought to be kept.

4 In light of what has later been made of this contract theory, even later in the same century by Locke, it is astonishing how tame are the moral-political conclusions that Grotius draws from it. The grounding of political legitimacy in consent is not put forward in order to question the credentials of existing governments. Rather, the aim of the exercise is to undercut the reasons for rebellion being all too irresponsibly urged by confessional zealots, the assumption being that existing legitimate regimes were ultimately founded on some consent of this kind. Grotius also seeks to give a firm foundation, beyond confessional cavil, to the basic rules of war and peace. In the context of the early seventeenth century, with its continuing bitterly fought wars of religion, this emphasis was entirely understandable.

It is Locke who first uses this theory as a justification of revolution and as a ground for limited government. Rights can now be seriously pleaded against power. Consent is not just an original agreement to set up government, but a continuing right to agree to taxation.

In the next three centuries, from Locke to our day, although the contract language may fall away and be used by only a minority of theorists, the underlying idea of society as existing for the (mutual) benefit of individuals and the defense of their rights takes on more and more importance. That

is, it both comes to be the dominant view, pushing older theories of society and newer rivals to the margins of political life and discourse, and it also generates more and more far-reaching claims on political life. The requirement of original consent, via the halfway house of Locke's consent to taxation, becomes the full-fledged doctrine of popular sovereignty under which we now live. The theory of natural rights ends up spawning a dense web of limits to legislative and executive action via the entrenched charters that have become an important feature of contemporary government. The presumption of equality, implicit in the starting point of the state of Nature, where people stand outside all relations of superiority and inferiority,¹ has been applied in more and more contexts, ending with the multiple equal treatment or nondiscrimination provisions, which are an integral part of most entrenched charters.

In other words, during these past four centuries, the idea of moral order implicit in this view of society has undergone a double expansion: in extension (more people live by it; it has become dominant) and in intensity (the demands it makes are heavier and more ramified). The idea has gone, as it were, through a series of "redactions," each richer and more demanding than the previous one, up to the present day.

This double expansion can be traced in a number of ways. The modern discourse of natural law started off in a rather specialized niche. It provided philosophers and legal theorists a language in which to talk about the legitimacy of governments and the rules of war and peace, the nascent doctrines of modern international law. But then it began to infiltrate and transform the discourse in other niches. One such case, which plays a crucial role in the story I'm telling, is the way the new idea of moral order begins to inflect and reformulate the descriptions of God's providence and the order he has established among humans and in the cosmos.

Even more important to our lives today is the manner in which this idea of order has become more and more central to our notions of society and polity, remaking them in the process. In the course of this expansion, it has moved from being a theory, animating the discourse of a few experts, to becoming integral to our social imaginary, that is, the way our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain.

Migrating from one niche to many, and from theory to social imaginary, the expansion is also visible along a third axis, as defined by the kind of demands this moral order makes on us.

- 6** Sometimes a conception of moral order does not carry with it a real expectation of its integral fulfillment. This does not mean no expectation at all, for otherwise it wouldn't be an idea of moral order in the sense that I'm using the term. It will be seen as something to strive for, and it will be realized by some, but the general sense may be that only a minority will really succeed in following it, at least under present conditions.

Thus the Christian Gospel generates the idea of a community of saints, inspired by love for God, for each other, and for humankind, whose members are devoid of rivalry, mutual resentment, love of gain, ambition to rule, and the like. The general expectation in the Middle Ages was that only a minority of saints really aspired to this and that they had to live in a world that greatly deviated from this ideal. But in the fullness of time, this would be the order of those gathered around God in the final dispensation. We can speak of a moral order here, and not just a gratuitous ideal, because it is thought to be in the process of full realization. But the time for this is not yet.

A distant analogy in another context would be some modern definitions of utopia, which refer us to a way of things that

may be realized in some eventually possible conditions, but that meanwhile serve as a standard to steer by.

Rather different from this are the orders that demand a more or less full realization here and now. This can be understood in two ways. In one, the order is held to be realized; it underlies the normal way of things. Medieval conceptions of political order were often of this kind. In the understanding of the “king’s two bodies,” his individual biological existence realizes and instantiates an undying royal “body.” In the absence of highly exceptional and scandalously disordered circumstances, on the occasion of some terrible usurpation, for instance, the order is fully realized. It offers us not so much a prescription as a key to understanding reality, rather as the Chain of Being does in relation to the cosmos that surrounds us. It provides the hermeneutic clue to understanding the real.

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But a moral order can stand in another relation to reality, as one not yet realized but demanding to be integrally carried out. It provides an imperative prescription.

Summing up these distinctions, we can say that an idea of moral or political order can either be ultimate, like the community of saints, or for the here and now, and if the latter, it can either be hermeneutic or prescriptive.

The modern idea of order, in contradistinction to the medieval Christian ideal, was seen from the beginning as for the here and now. But it definitely migrates along a path, running from the more hermeneutic to the more prescriptive. As used in its original niche by thinkers like Grotius and Pufendorf, it offered an interpretation of what must underlie established governments; grounded on a supposed founding contract, these enjoyed unquestioned legitimacy. Natural law theory at its origin was a hermeneutic of legitimation.

But already with Locke, the political theory can justify

revolution, indeed, make revolution morally imperative in certain circumstances; at the same time, other general features of the human moral predicament provide a hermeneutic of legitimacy in relation to, for instance, property. Later on down the line, this notion of order will be woven into redactions demanding even more revolutionary changes, including in relations of property, as reflected in influential theories such as those of Rousseau and Marx, for instance.

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Thus, while moving from one niche to many and migrating from theory into social imaginary, the modern idea of order also travels on a third axis and the discourses it generates are strung out along the path from the hermeneutic to the prescriptive. In the process, it comes to be intricately with a wide range of ethical concepts, but the resulting amalgams have in common that they make essential use of this understanding of political and moral order that descends from modern natural law theory.

This three-axis expansion is certainly remarkable. It cries out for explanation; unfortunately, it is not part of my rather narrowly focused intentions to offer a causal explanation of the rise of the modern social imaginary. I will be happy if I can clarify somewhat the forms it has taken. But this by its very nature will help to focus more sharply the issues of causal explanation, on which I offer some random thoughts later. For the moment, I want to explore further the peculiar features of this modern order.

A crucial point that ought to be evident from the foregoing is that the notion of moral order I am using goes beyond some proposed schedule of norms that ought to govern our mutual relations and/or political life. What an understanding of moral order adds to an awareness and acceptance of norms is an identification of features of the world or divine action or human life that make certain norms both right and (up to the

point indicated) realizable. In other words, the image of order carries a definition not only of what is right, but of the context in which it makes sense to strive for and hope to realize the right (at least partially).

It is clear that the images of moral order that descend through a series of transformations from that inscribed in the natural law theories of Grotius and Locke are rather different from those embedded in the social imaginary of the premodern age. Two important types of premodern moral order are worth singling out here, because we can see them being gradually taken over, displaced, or marginalized by the Grotian-Lockean strand during the transition to political modernity. One is based on the idea of the Law of a people, which has governed this people since time out of mind and which, in a sense, defines it as a people. This idea seems to have been widespread among the Indo-European tribes who at various stages erupted into Europe. It was very powerful in seventeenth-century England under the guise of the Ancient Constitution and became one of the key justifying ideas of the rebellion against the king.²

This case should be enough to show that these notions are not always conservative in import. But we should also include in this category the sense of normative order that seems to have been carried on through generations in peasant communities and out of which they developed a picture of the “moral economy,” from which they could criticize the burdens laid on them by landlords or the exactions levied on them by state and church.³ Here again, the recurring idea seems to have been that an original acceptable distribution of burdens had been displaced by usurpation and ought to be rolled back.

The other type of moral order is organized around a notion of a hierarchy in society that expresses and corresponds to a hierarchy in the cosmos. These were often theorized in language drawn from the Platonic-Aristotelian concept of Form,