Two Theories of Modernity

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There seem to be at large in our culture two ways of understanding the rise of modernity. They are in effect two different takes on what makes our contemporary society different from its forebears. In one take, we can look at the difference between present-day Western society and, say, that of medieval Europe as analogous to the difference between medieval Europe and medieval China or India. In other words, we can think of the difference as one between civilizations, each with their own culture. 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. From 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 am leaning on a use of the word *culture*, which 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 that 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 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 a group of closely related cultures) with its own specific understandings of, for example, person, nature, and the good. This culture can 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 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 is rather 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: Transformations, including 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 position in a specific constellation of understandings of, say, person, society, or good; rather, they are 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.

Modernity in this kind of theory is understood as issuing from a rational or social operation which is culture-neutral. This is not to say that the theory cannot acknowledge good historical reasons why this transformation first arose in one civilization rather than another, or why some may undergo it more easily than others. Rather, the point is that the operation is defined not in terms of its specific point of arrival but as a general function that can take any specific culture as its input.

To grasp the difference from another angle, this operation is not seen as supposing or reflecting an option for one specific set of human values or understandings among others. In the case of social explanations, causal weight is given to historical developments, like industrialization, that have an impact on values but are often not seen as reflecting specific options in this domain. When it comes to explanations in terms of rationality, this is seen as the exercise of a general capacity, which was only awaiting its proper conditions to unfold. Under certain conditions human beings will come to see that scientific thinking is valid, that

instrumental rationality pays off, that religious beliefs involve unwarranted leaps, that facts and values are separate. These transformations may be facilitated by our having certain values and understandings, just as they are hampered by the dominance of others. They are not *defined* as the espousal of some such constellation; rather, they are defined by something we come to see concerning the whole context in which values and understandings are promulgated.

It should be evident that the dominant theories of modernity over the last two centuries have been of the acultural sort. Many have explained the development of modernity at least partly by our "coming to see" something like the range of supposed truths mentioned here. Or else the changes have been explained partly by culture-neutral social developments, such as Emile Durkheim's move from mechanical to differentiated, organic forms of social cohesion or Alexis de Tocqueville's assumption of creeping democracy (by which he meant a push toward equality). In Max Weber's interpretation, rationalization was a steady process, occurring within all cultures over time.

But above all, explanations of modernity in terms of *reason* seem to be the most popular. Even social explanations tend to invoke reason: Social transformations, like mobility and industrialization, are thought to bring about intellectual and spiritual changes because they shake people loose from old habits and beliefs—religion or traditional morality—which then become unsustainable because they lack the kind of independent rational grounding that the beliefs of modernity—such as individualism or instrumental reason—are assumed to have.

But, one might object, what about the widespread and popular *negative* theories of modernity, those that see it not as gain but as loss or decline? Curiously enough, they too have been acultural in their own way. To see this, we have to enlarge somewhat the preceding description. Instead of seeing the transformations as the unfolding of capacities, negative theories have often interpreted modernity as a falling prey to dangers. But these have often been just as aculturally conceived. Modernity is characterized by the loss of the horizon; by a loss of roots; by the hubris that denies human limits, our dependence on history or God, that places unlimited confidence in the powers of frail human reason; by a trivializing self-indulgence that has no stomach for the heroic dimension of life; and so on.

The overwhelming weight of interpretation in our culture, positive

and negative, tends to the acultural. The voices on the cultural side are fewer if powerful. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, offers a reading of modern scientific culture that describes it as actuated by a specific constellation of values. Weber, besides offering a theory of rationalization as a steady, culture-independent force, gave a reading of the Protestant ethic as a particular set of religio-moral concerns that in turn helped to bring about modern capitalism.

So acultural theories predominate. Is this bad? I think it is. To see why, we have to bring out a bit more clearly what these theories foreground and what they tend to screen out.

Acultural theories tend to describe the transition of modernity in terms of a loss of traditional beliefs and allegiances. This loss may be seen as coming about as a result of institutional changes: For example, mobility and urbanization are understood to 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 for whom scientific reason is too narrow. But all these theories concur in some respects: old views and loyalties are eroded; old horizons are washed away, in Nietzsche's image; the sea of faith recedes, following Arnold. This stanza from Arnold's *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]

The tone here is one of regret and nostalgia. But the underlying image of eroded faith could serve just as well for an upbeat story of the progress of triumphant scientific reason. From one point of view, humanity has shed a lot of false and harmful myths. From another, it has lost touch

1. Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*, ed. Jonathan Middlebrook (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1970), 21–28.

with crucial spiritual realities. But in either case, the change is seen as a loss of belief.

What emerges comes about through this loss. The upbeat story cherishes the dominance of an empirical-scientific approach to knowledge claims of individualism, negative freedom, and instrumental rationality. But these come to the fore because they are what we humans "normally" value, once we are no longer impeded or blinded by false or superstitious beliefs and the stultifying modes of life that accompany them. Once myth and error are dissipated, these are the only games in town. The empirical approach is the only valid way of acquiring knowledge, and this becomes evident as soon as we free ourselves from the thraldom of a false metaphysics. Increasing recourse to instrumental rationality allows us to get more and more of what we want, and we were only ever deterred from this by unfounded injunctions to limit ourselves. Individualism is the normal fruit of human self-regard absent the illusory claims of God, the Chain of Being, or the sacred order of society.

In other words, we moderns behave as we do because we have "come to see" that certain claims were false—or, on the negative reading, because we have lost sight of certain perennial truths. What this view omits from the picture is the possibility that Western modernity might be powered by its own positive visions of the good—that is, by one constellation of such visions among available others—rather than by the only viable set left after the old myths and legends have been exploded. It screens out whatever there might be of a specific moral direction to Western modernity, beyond what is dictated by the general form of human life itself, once old error is shown up (or old truth forgotten): People behave as individuals because that's what they naturally do when no longer constrained by the old religions, metaphysics, and customs, though this may be seen as a glorious liberation or a purblind enmiring in egoism, depending on our perspective. What it cannot be seen as is a novel form of moral self-understanding, not definable simply by the negation of what preceded it.

Otherwise put, what gets screened out is the possibility that Western modernity might be sustained by its own original spiritual vision—that is, not one generated simply and inescapably by transition.

Before trying to say how bad or good this is, I want to speculate about the motives for this predominance of the acultural. Such a scenario is understandable when we reflect that Westerners have for centuries been

living the transition to modernity out of the civilization we used to call Christendom. It is hard to live through a change of this moment without being partisan, and in this spirit we quite naturally reach for explanations which are immediately evaluative, on one side or the other. Now nothing stamps the change as more unproblematically right than the account that we have "come to see" through certain falsehoods, just as the explanation that we have come to forget important truths brands it as unquestionably wrong. To make such confident judgments on the basis of a cultural account would presuppose our having carried through a complex comparative assessment of modernity's original vision, over against that of the Christendom which preceded it, to a clear unambiguous conclusion—hardly an easy task, if realizable at all.

Indeed, since a cultural theory supposes the point of view in which we see our own culture as one among others, and this at best is a recent acquisition in our civilization, it is not surprising that the first accounts of revolutionary change were acultural. For the most part our ancestors looked on other civilizations as made up of barbarians, infidels, or savages. It would have been absurd to expect the contemporaries of the French Revolution, on either side of the political divide, to have seen the cultural shift within this political upheaval, when the very idea of cultural pluralism was just dawning in the writings of, for example, Johann Gottfried von Herder.

But even when this standpoint becomes more easily available, we are drawn by our partisan attachments to neglect it. This is partly because an immediately evaluative explanation (on the right side) is more satisfying—we tend to want to glorify modernity, or to vilify it. And it is partly because we fear that a cultural theory might make value judgments impossible. The latter notion is, I believe, a mistake; but mistake or not, it plays a role here.

Another factor driving acultural theories has been the vogue for materialistic explanations in social science and history. By this I mean, in this context, explanations that shy away from invoking moral or spiritual factors in favor of (what are thought to be) harder and more down-to-earth causes. And so the developments I adverted to above—the growth of science, individualism, negative freedom, instrumental reason, and the other striking features of the culture of modernity—have often been accounted for as by-products of social change, spinoffs from industrialization, greater mobility, or urbanization. There are certainly

important causal relations to be traced here, but the accounts that invoke them frequently skirt altogether the issue of whether these changes in culture and outlook owe anything to their own inherent power as moral ideals. The implicit answer is often in the negative.[2]

Of course, the social changes that are supposed to spawn the new outlook must themselves be explained, and this will involve some recourse to human motivations unless we suppose that industrialization or the growth of cities occurred entirely in a fit of absence of mind. We need some notion of what moved people to push steadily in one direction—for example, toward the greater application of technology to production or toward greater concentrations of population. But what is invoked here are often nonmoral motivations. By that I mean motivations that can actuate people quite without connection to any moral ideal, as I defined this earlier. As a consequence, we very often find these social changes explained in terms of the desire for greater wealth or power, or the means of survival or control over others. Of course, all these things can be woven into moral ideals, but they need not be. And so explanation in terms of them is considered sufficiently hard and scientific.

Even where individual freedom and the enlargement of instrumental reason are seen as ideas whose intrinsic attractions can help explain their rise, this attraction is frequently understood in nonmoral terms. That is, the power of these ideas is often understood not in terms of their moral force, but as accruing from the advantages they seem to bestow on people regardless of their moral outlook, regardless even of whether they have a moral outlook. Freedom allows you to do what you want, and the greater application of instrumental reason gets you more of what you want, whatever that is.[3]

2. Of course, for a certain vulgar Marxism, the negative answer is quite explicit. Ideas are the product of economic changes. But much non-Marxist social science operates implicitly on similar premises, and this in spite of the orientation of some of the great founders of social science, like Weber, who recognized the crucial role of moral and religious ideas in history.

3. Individualism has in fact been used in two quite different senses. In one it is a moral ideal, one facet of which I have been discussing. In another, it is an amoral phenomenon, something like what we mean by egoism. The rise of individualism in this sense is usually a phenomenon of breakdown, where the loss of a traditional horizon leaves mere anomie in its wake, and people fend for themselves. It is, of course,

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It is obvious that wherever this kind of explanation becomes culturally dominant, the motivation to explore the original spiritual vision of modernity is very weak; indeed, the capacity even to recognize some such thing nears zero. And this effectively takes cultural theories off the agenda.

So what, if anything, is bad about this? Three things: two massive errors in judgment, which ought to be on reflection fairly obvious to us, and a third more subtle mistake, about the whole framework in which human history unfolds.

THE FIRST MASSIVE ERROR

I think Western modernity *is* in part based on an original moral outlook. This is not to say that our account of it in terms of our "coming to see" certain things is wholly wrong. On the contrary: Post-seventeenth-century natural science has a validity, and the accompanying technology an efficacy, that we have established. And, sooner or later, all societies are forced to acquire this efficacy or be dominated by others (and, hence, have it imposed on them anyway).

But it would be quite wrong to think that we can make do with an acultural theory alone. It is not just that other facets of what we identify as modern, such as the tendency to try to split fact from value or the decline of religious practice, are far from reposing on incontestable truths which have finally been discovered—as one can claim for modern physics, for example. In the West science itself has grown in close symbiosis with a certain culture, in the sense in which I am using that term here—that is, a constellation of understandings of person, nature, society, and the good.

To rely on an acultural theory is to miss all this. One gets a distorted understanding of Western modernity in one of two ways: On one side, we misclassify changes that reflect the culture peculiar to the modern West as the product of unproblematic discovery, or the ineluctable con-

catastrophic to confuse these two kinds of individualism, which have utterly different causes and consequences. Which is why de Tocqueville carefully distinguishes individualism from egoism.

sequence of some social change, like the introduction of technology. The decline in religious practice has frequently been seen in this light. This is the error of seeing everything modern as belonging to one Enlightenment package. On the other side, we fail altogether to examine certain facets of the modern constellation, closely interwoven with our understandings of science and religion, that don't strike us as being part of the transformation to modernity. We don't identify them as among the spectacular changes that have produced contemporary civilization, and we often fail to see even that there have been changes, reading these facets falsely as perennial. Such is the usual fate of those, largely implicit, understandings of human agency that I have grouped under the portmanteau term, the "modern identity,"[4] such as the various forms of modern inwardness or the affirmation of ordinary life. We all too easily imagine that people have always seen themselves as Westerners do, as in respect of dichotomies like inward/outward. And we thus utterly miss the role these new understandings have played in the rise of Western modernity. I want to make a claim of this kind in the following discussion in relation to the rise of the modern public sphere.

And so a purely acultural theory distorts and impoverishes our understanding of the West, both through misclassification (the Enlightenment package error) and through too narrow a focus. But such a theory's effects on our understanding of other cultures is even more devastating. The belief that modernity comes from a single, universally applicable operation imposes a falsely uniform pattern on the multiple encounters of non-Western cultures with the exigencies of science, technology, and industrialization. As long as we are bemused by the Enlightenment package, we will believe that all cultures *have* to undergo a range of cultural changes, drawn from our experience—for example, secularization or the growth of atomistic forms of self-identification. As long as we leave Western notions of identity unexamined, we will fail to see how other cultures differ and how this difference crucially conditions the way in which they integrate the truly universal features of modernity.

4. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

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 which has resisted the challenge. 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 Western.

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, traditions 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) which carry us through the transition. This outlook 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 in the early centuries, 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 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 that reflect their divergent starting points. Different cultures' understandings of the person, social relations, states of mind, goods and bads, virtues and vices, and the sacred and the 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 they 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 "alternative modernities."

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 here 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 here which carry the transition—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 in a sense irresistible. Whoever fails to take them, or some good functional equivalent, on 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 preemptive modernization. The fate of other Asian societies that had not managed to modernize 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 of those cases where the original culture is quite 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 which, 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 alternative 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, and various modulations of Islamic modernity will probably enter alongside the gamut of Western societies, which are also far from being 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 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, that 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 this cannot consist of just copying the West's adaptations. By definition, the creative adaptation using traditional resources has to be different from culture to culture. Simply 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.

There is thus a call to difference felt by modernizing elites that corresponds to something objective in their situation. This is of course part of the background to nationalism. But merely wanting a creative adaptation doesn't ensure that one brings it off. And some of the formulae that have been proposed appear with hindsight pretty much nonstarters; 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,[5] which attempt to tack the new power-conferring practices onto an unchanged way of life. But these institutions and practices almost always require new disciplines, new understandings of agency, or 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 coordination required by a modern bureaucracy, to see that this is so. The really creative adaptation can modify an existing culture to make, for example, successful entrepreneurship and bureaucratic organization henceforth part of its repertory. This generally cannot be brought about without profound changes in earlier ways of life.

The point of the alternative modernities thesis is that these adaptations don't have to and generally won't be identical across civilizations. Indeed, something is converging here, while other things diverge. It might be tempting to say that 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. It 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, and 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.[6] But with the cultures also go differences in form: in size of firm, basis of trust within it, and its modes of procedure. 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 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. A given society will, indeed must, adopt the mode for which it has the cultural resources. That is the essence of creative adaptation.[7]

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 which 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 THIRD MAJOR PREMISE

The view from Dover Beach foreshortens our understanding of Western modernity and blinds us to the diversity in our world. But it also gives us a false and distorted perspective on the transition. It makes us read the rise of modernity in terms of the dissipation of certain beliefs, either as its major cause (rational explanations), or as inevitable concomitant (social explanations). What is beyond the horizon on Dover Beach is the possibility that what mainly differentiates us from our fore-

5. Oral communication to the seminar on alternative modernities held by the Center for Transcultural Studies, Delhi, December 1997.

6. See Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

7. I have been defining successful adaptation here in terms of a functional challenge—how to meet the demands of economic growth and military power. But we can also look at these solutions in another perspective. For many of us, modernity may also carry normative force, centering around such goods as freedom, equality, and the respect of human rights. From this point of view, functionally successful adaptations may be bad. Pinochet's Chile was a stunning economic success, for a while anyway. There is some evidence that the most horrendous regimes—Nazism, Bolshevism—end up being maladaptive or even self-destructing. But it is hard to believe that this will always be the case. Even the best regimes on earth incorporate injustices and modes of exclusion.

One can envisage another kind of search for an alternative modernity, one that would realize its normative promise more fully. This is an important issue—indeed, one of the great issues—of our time. But the two questions are distinct: Can we create a normatively superior alternative modernity? Can there be a plurality of culturally different alternative modernit*ies?* We should add that the attempt to realize new positive answers to the second question should be subject to the normative conditions that the first raises. Not every mode of cultural distinctness is thereby justified and good.

bears is not so much our explicit beliefs as what I want to call the background understanding against which our beliefs are formulated.

Here I am picking up on an idea from the work of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Michael Polanyi and further elaborated recently by John Searle and Hubert Dreyfus.[8] The notion is that our explicit beliefs about our world and ourselves are held against a background of unformulated (and perhaps in part unformulable) understandings, in relation to which these beliefs make the sense they do. These understandings take a variety of forms and range over a number of matters. In one dimension, the background incorporates matters that *could* be formulated as beliefs but aren't functioning as such in our world (and couldn't *all* function as such because of their unlimited extent). To take Wittgenstein's example from *On Certainty:* I don't normally have a *belief* that the world didn't start only five minutes ago, but the whole way I inquire into things treats the world as being there since time out of mind.[9] Similarly, I don't usually have the belief that a huge pit hasn't been dug in front of my door, but I treat the world that way as I emerge in the morning to go to work. In my ways of dealing with things is incorporated the background understanding that the world is stable and has been there a long time.

In other dimensions, I have this kind of understanding of myself as an agent with certain powers, of myself as an agent among other agents, on certain, only partly explicit footings with them. And I want to add: an agent moving in certain kinds of social spaces, with a sense of how both I and these spaces inhabit time, a sense of how both I and they relate to the cosmos and to God or whatever I recognize as the source(s) of good.

In my addition here, I have entered controversial territory. While perhaps everyone can be got easily to agree on the kinds of background understandings I cited from Wittgenstein, and it is arguably obvious

8. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper, 1958); John Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do* (New York: Harper, 1979).

9. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), par. 260 and forward.

that I have some sense of myself as agent, the notion that different modes of social belonging, different understandings of time, and even more, of God, the good, or the cosmos, should be part of the background may arouse resistance. That is because we easily can believe that we have background understanding in the inescapable dimensions of our lives as agents, functioning in a physical and social world. But when we come to our supposed relations to God, the good, or the cosmos, surely these things only enter our world through our being inducted into our society's culture, and they must enter in the form of beliefs that have been handed down to us.

But this is in fact not how it works. Of course, in any theistic culture there will be *some* beliefs about God, but our sense of a god and our relation to one will also be formed by, for example, modes of ritual, the kinds of prayer we have been taught, what we pick up from the attitudes of pious and impious people, and the like. A similar point can be made about the different kinds of social space. There may be some doctrines formulated about the nature of society and the hierarchical rankings that constitute it which are explicitly proffered for our adherence, but we also come to understand whole "volumes" in the ways we are taught—for example, to show deference to certain people or at certain times and places. A social understanding is built in to what Pierre Bourdieu calls our "habitus," the ways we are taught to behave, which become unreflecting, second nature to us.[10]

We know our way around society somewhat the way we know our way around our physical environment, not primarily and principally because we have some map of either in our heads, but because we know how to treat different people and situations appropriately. In this know-

10. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris: Minuit, 1980). "On pourrait, déformant le mot de Proust, dire que les jambes, les bras sont pleins d'impératifs engourdis. Et l'on n'en finirait pas d'énumérer les valeurs faites corps, par la transsubstantiation qu'opère la persuasion clandestibe d'une pédagogie implicite, capable d'inculquer toute une cosmologie, une éthique, une métaphysique, une politique, à travers des injonctions aussi insignifiantes que 'tiens-toi droit' ou 'ne tiens pas ton couteau de la main gauche' et d'inscire dans les détails en apparence les plus insignifiants de la *tenue,* du *maintien* ou des *manières* corporelles et verbales les principes fondamentaux de l'arbitraire culturel, ainsi placés hors des prises de la conscience et de l'explicitation" (Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique,* 117).

how there is, for example, a stance toward the elders which treats them as having a certain dignity. What it is about them that is felt to command this stance may not yet be spelled out: There may be no word for *dignity* in the vocabulary of the tribe. But whatever it is which we will later want to articulate with this word is already in the world of the youngsters who bow in that particular way and address their elders in low tones and with the proper language. *Dignity* is in their world in the sense that they deal with it, respond to it, perhaps revere it or resent it. It is just not formulated in a description and hence does not figure in an explicit belief. Its being in their world is part of their background understanding.

It is in similar ways that God or the good can figure in our world. Surrounding express doctrines will be a richer penumbra of embodied understanding. We can imaginatively extend the example of the previous paragraph. Suppose that one of the things that makes the elders worthy of respect is just that they are closer to the gods. Then the divine, too, which we revere through these old people, will be in our world in part through our knowing how to treat them. It will be in our world through the appropriate habitus.

In fact, we might distinguish three levels of understanding from the preceding discussion. There is the level of explicit doctrine—about society, the divine, and the cosmos. There is the level of what I called, following Bourdieu, the habitus, or embodied understanding. Somewhat between the two is a level which we might call (with some trepidation, because this is a semantically overloaded term) the symbolic. I mean by this whatever understanding is expressed in ritual, in symbols (in the everyday sense), and in works of art. What exists on this level is more explicit than mere gesture or appropriate action, because ritual or work can have a mimetic or an evocative dimension and hence point to something they imitate or call forth. But it is not explicit in the self-conscious way of doctrinal formulations, which can be submitted to the demands of logic, permit of a metadiscourse in which they are examined in turn, and the like.

We can see why it might be a big mistake to think that what distinguishes us from our premodern forebears is mainly a lot of beliefs of theirs which we have shed. Even if we want, following *Dover Beach,* to see their age as one of a faith which we have lost, it might be very misleading to think of this difference in terms simply of doctrines to which

they subscribe and we do not. Because below the doctrinal level are at least two others: that of embodied background understanding and that which while nourished in embodied habitus is given expression on the symbolic level. As well as the doctrinal understanding of society, there is the one incorporated in habitus, and a level of images as yet unformulated in doctrine, for which we might borrow a term frequently used by contemporary French writers: *l'imaginaire social*—what we can call the social imaginary.

Why does it matter to see the changeover as more than doctrinal? Because otherwise we might have a very distorted picture of it. When people undergo a change in belief, they shift their views between already formulated possibilities. Formerly, they thought that God exists. But in formulating this belief they were quite aware that there was another option; indeed, usually they are aware that others have already taken the atheist option, that there are arguments for and against it, and so on. Now, when they switch to atheism, they move within positions already in their repertory, between points already within their horizons.

But some of the major changes in embodied understanding and social imaginary alter the very repertory and introduce new possibilities that were not before on the horizon. I will sketch presently what this might involve in connection with the rise of the public sphere. Modernity involves the coming to be of new kinds of public space, which cannot be accounted for in terms of changes in explicit views, either of factual belief or normative principle. Rather, the transition involves to some extent the definition of new possible spaces hitherto outside the repertory of our forebears and beyond the limits of their social imaginary. The consequence of seeing these changes as alterations of (factual or normative) belief is that we unwittingly make our ancestors too much like us. To the extent that we see ourselves as differing from them in *belief,* we see them as having the same doctrinal repertory as ours, merely opting differently within it. To give them the same repertory, we have to align their embodied understanding and social imaginary with ours. We falsely make them in this sense our contemporaries and grievously underestimate the nature and scope of the change that brought our world about.

So an acultural theory tends to make us both miss the original vision of the good implicit in Western modernity and underestimate the nature of the transformation that brought about this modernity. These two

drawbacks appear to be linked. Some of the important shifts in culture, in our understandings of personhood, the good, and the like, which have brought about the original vision of Western modernity, can only be seen if we bring into focus the major changes in embodied understanding and social imaginary which the last centuries have engendered. They tend to disappear if we flatten these changes, read our own background and imaginary into our forebears, and concentrate on their beliefs which we no longer share.

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These connections will, of course, have to be made in detail, and there is not space here to do that. Just to give a taste of what is involved, I could invoke the modern understanding and reality (the two are linked) of a public sphere of open debate and exchange through media. This is thought to be an essential feature of any mature and legitimate society—so much so that dictatorial and totalitarian regimes tend to try to fake it, offering supposedly objective news broadcasts, editorials in party newspapers that purport to be the communication of someone's opinion, "spontaneous" demonstrations, and the like.

Now the modern public sphere is a strange kind of reality in an important respect. It is supposed to be a space of discussion linking in principle or potentially everyone, even though its many participants never meet all together in one place. This space has to be sustained by a particular kind of social imaginary, one that is in many respects rather different from premodern modes of imaginary and that has a lot to do with specifically modern understandings of secular time and simultaneity.[11] Or so, anyway, I want to claim that closer study would demonstrate. Such a study would reveal, I believe, just how our understanding of our relations to society, time, the cosmos, the good, and God have been transformed with the coming of our era.

If this transformation is true, then we can see how inadequate and misleading acultural accounts can be. In my sense of this term, these are explanations of Western modernity that see it not as one culture among others but, rather, as what emerges when any "traditional" culture is put through certain (rational or social) changes. On this view, modernity is

11. There is an interesting discussion of this in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 28–31.

not specifically Western, even though it may have started in the West. Instead, it is that form of life toward which all cultures converge, as they go through, one after another, substantially the same changes. These may be seen primarily in intellectual terms as the growth of rationality and science; or primarily in social terms as the development of certain institutions and practices: a market economy or rationalized forms of administration. But in either case, the changes are partly understood in terms of the loss of traditional beliefs, either because they are undermined by the growth of reason or because they are marginalized by institutional change.

Even the social explanations assume that these beliefs suffer from a lack of rational justification, since the solvent effect of social change is held to lie in the fact that it disturbs old patterns that made it possible to hold on to these earlier beliefs in spite of their lack of rational grounding. For instance, the continuance of a static, agricultural way of life, largely at the mercy of the vagaries of climate, supposedly makes certain religious beliefs look plausible, which lose their hold once humans see what it is to take their fate in their own hands through industrial development. Or a largely immobile society leads individuals to see their fate as bound up closely with that of their neighbors and inhibits the growth of an individualism which naturally flourishes once these constricting limits are lifted.

The acultural theory tends to see the process of modernity as involving among other things the shucking off of beliefs and ways which don't have much rational justification, leaving us with an outlook many of whose elements can be seen more as hard, residual facts: that we are individuals—that is, beings whose behavior is ultimately to be explained as individuals—living in a profane time, who have to extract what we need to live from nature and whom it behooves therefore to be maximally instrumentally rational, without allowing ourselves to be diverted from this goal by the metaphysical and religious beliefs that held our ancestors back.[12] Instrumental rationality commands a scientific attitude to nature and human life.

12. This development of instrumental rationality is what is frequently described as secularization. See, for instance, Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966). "A village chief in a tribal society operates largely with a given set of goals and a given set of means

At the heart of the acultural approach is the view that modernity involves our "coming to see" certain kernel truths about the human condition, those I have just adverted to. There is some justification for talking of our "coming to see" the truth when we consider the revolution of natural science which began in the seventeenth century. But the mistake of the acultural approach is to lump all the supposed kernel truths about human life into the same package, as though they were all endorsed equally by science, on a par, say, with particle physics.[13]

I have been arguing that this is a crucial mistake. It misrepresents our forebears, and it distorts the process of transition from them to us. In particular, seeing the change as the decline of certain *beliefs* covers up the great differences in background understanding and in the social imaginary of different ages. More, it involves a sort of ethnocentrism of the present. Since human beings always do hold their explicit beliefs against a background and in the context of an imaginary, failure to notice the difference amounts to the unwitting attribution to them of our own. This is the classic ethnocentric projection, matched by and indeed connected with the inability to perceive the differences in our contemporary world.

This projection gives support to the implicit Whiggism of the acultural theory, whereby moderns have "come to see" the kernel truths. If you think of premoderns as operating with the same background

of attaining these goals which have grown up and been hallowed by custom. The secularization of culture is the processes whereby traditional orientations and attitudes give way to more dynamic decision-making processes involving the gathering of information, the evaluation of information, the laying out of alternative courses of action, the selection of a given action from among those possible courses, and the means whereby one tests whether or not a given course of action is producing the consequences which were intended" (24–25). And later: "The emergence of a pragmatic, empirical orientation is one component of the secularization process" (58).

13. Even Ernest Gellner, who is light years of sophistication away from the crudities of Almond and Powell, puts himself in the acultural camp, for all his interesting insights into modernity as a new constellation. He does this by linking what I am calling the supposed kernel truths with what he calls cognitive advance in a single package. The modern constellation unchained science, and that in his view seems to confer the same epistemic status on the entire package. "Specialization, atomization, instrumental rationality, independence of fact and value, growth and provisionality of knowledge are all linked with each other." See *Plough, Sword and Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 122.

understanding of human beings as moderns—that is, as instrumental individuals—and you code their understandings of God, cosmos, and multidimensional time as beliefs held against this background, then these beliefs do, indeed, appear as arbitrary and lacking in justification, and it is not surprising that the social changes dislodged them. But an examination of the rise of the public sphere would show, I believe, that this is not what happened. It is not that we sloughed off a whole lot of unjustified beliefs, leaving an implicit self-understanding which had always been there to operate at last untrammeled. Rather, one constellation of implicit understandings of our relation to God, the cosmos, other humans, and time was replaced by another in a multifaceted mutation. Seeing things this way not only gives us a better handle on what happened but also allows us to understand ourselves better. As long as we think that our implicit self-understanding is the universal human one, as long as we fail to note its contrast with others, we will have an incomplete and distorted understanding of it. This is always a price of ethnocentrism.

From a standpoint immured within any culture other cultures look weird. No doubt we would look strange—as well as blasphemous and licentious—to our medieval ancestors. But there is a particularly high cost in self-misunderstanding which attaches to the ethnocentrism of the modern. The kernel truths of the acultural theory incorporate an often unreflective methodological individualism, along with a belief in the omnicompetence of natural science. Impelled by the latter, its protagonists are frequently tempted to cast our "coming to see" the kernel truths as a sort of discovery in science. But the discoveries of natural science are of neutral facts—truths that are "value-free," on which value may be subsequently placed by human beings but which themselves are devoid of moral significance. It belongs to the range of such "natural" facts as that we are individuals, impelled to operate by instrumental reason, maximizing our advantage when we are not deterred from doing so by unfounded belief.[14]

Now this hides from view two important connections. First, the way in which our implicit understanding of ourselves as agents always places us in certain relations to others. Because of the very nature of the human

14. Thus Gellner includes "independence of fact and value" in his package, along with "growth and provisionality of knowledge" (*Plough, Sword and Book*, 122).

condition—that we can only define ourselves in exchange with others, those who bring us up and those whose society we come to see as constitutive of our identity—our self-understanding always places us among others. The placements differ greatly, and understanding these differences and their change is the stuff of history.

We can see a good example of what this involves in the speculative sketch I offered of the rise of the public sphere. This, and other similar modes of social imagining, is closely tied up with the rise of modern individualism. The account I would like to offer would have us see the rise of this new individual identity as inextricably linked to the new understandings of time and society. Individualism is one side of a coin, of which the flip side is new modes of social imaginary.

By contrast, a widespread alternative view sees individualism as involving a completely self-referential identity; one in which agents are first of all aware of and focused on themselves and only subsequently discover a need for and determine their relations to others. The human of the "state of nature" was, indeed, an important constituent of the early modern imaginary, but we must not make the mistake of understanding the people who imagined it in its light. Modern individualism is coterminous with—indeed, is defined by—a new understanding of our placement among others, one which gives an important place to common action in profane time and hence to the idea of consensually founded unions, which receives influential formulation in the myth of an original state of nature and a social contract. Individualism is not just a withdrawal from society but a reconception of what human society can be. To think of it as pure withdrawal is to confuse individualism, which is always a moral ideal, with the anomie of breakdown.

Similarly, our understanding of ourselves always incorporates some understanding of the good and our relation to it. Here, too, there are radical differences. The good may be conceived theistically, or as in the cosmos (as with Plato's Idea of the Good). But it may also be understood as residing in us, in the inherent dignity of the human person as a reasoning being, for instance, as we find with Immanuel Kant. However understood, the notion of a human identity without such a sense brings us close to the unimaginable limit of total breakdown.[15]

15. I have tried to argue this point at greater length in *Sources of the Self*, chaps. 1–4.

All this is occluded, indeed doubly. Seeing the evolution of instrumental individualism as the discovery of a natural fact does not just involve projecting our background onto our ancestors. In addition, the naturalist, scientistic outlook which generates this error has been heavily intricated with the representational, foundationalist epistemology that descends from Descartes and Locke. This epistemology has suppressed all recognition of the background. It conceives our knowledge of the world as consisting of particulate, explicit representations. This means that we not only project our own background backward but also render this error invisible by repressing all awareness of backgrounds as such.[16] The ethnocentric colonization of the past cannot be brought to light, because the very terms in which it might appear have been abolished.

The very idea of an individual who might become aware of himself and then only subsequently, or at least independently, determine what importance others have for him and what he will accept as good, belongs to post-Cartesian, foundationalist fantasy. Once we recognize that our explicit thoughts only can be entertained against a background sense of who and where we are in the world and among others and in moral space, we can see that we can never be without some relation to the crucial reference points I already enumerated: world, others, time, the good. This relation can, indeed, be transformed as we move from one culture or age to another, but it cannot just fall away. We cannot be without *some* sense of our moral situation, *some* sense of our connectedness to others.

The naturalistic account of the discovery of the kernel truths, implicit in the acultural theory, misses all these connections. When the old metaphysical and religious beliefs crumble, we find as a matter of neutral fact that we are instrumental individuals, and we need to draw from elsewhere our values and acceptable grounds for association with others. In contrast, I want to describe the change as moving us from one dense constellation of background understanding and imaginary

16. I have discussed the nature of this modern epistemology and its suppression of the background at greater length in "Overcoming Epistemology" in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987) and "Lichtung oder Lebensform," *Der Löwe spricht . . . und wir können ihn nicht verstehen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991).

to another, both of which place us in relation to others and the good. There is never atomistic and neutral self-understanding; there is only a constellation (ours) which tends to throw up the myth of this self-understanding as part of its imaginary. This is of the essence of a cultural theory of modernity.

On Reconciling Cosmopolitan Unity and National Diversity

Thomas McCarthy

There are few ideas as important to the history of modern democracy as that of the nation as a political community. And yet, by comparison to its companion idea of political community as based on the agreement of free and equal individuals, it remained until recently a marginal concern of post-World War II liberal theory. The aftermath of decolonization and the breakup of the Soviet empire, among other things, has changed that and brought it again to the center of theoretical attention. And once there, the deep-seated tensions in theory between nationalism and liberalism have proved to be as hard to overlook as their all too familiar tensions in practice. Thus many liberal political theorists have taken to framing their inquiries into nationalism by asking whether there is a conception of nationhood that is compatible with basic liberal principles. Can the values of nation and culture be combined with those of freedom and equality within the basic structure of the democratic constitutional nation-state? One fault line that has attracted its share of attention divides liberal universalism from nationalist particularism. That division becomes all the more salient when the topic of cosmopolitanism comes up, as it does more and more frequently, partly in reaction to horrors perpetrated under the banner of ethnonationalism. The framing question then is whether there is a conception of nationhood that is compatible with cosmopolitanism when the latter is understood as the establishment of a basic structure of cosmopolitical justice under a global rule of law.

Immanuel Kant was among the first to understand cosmopolitanism in these terms, and his attempt to reconcile it with nationalism, most famously in his essay on "Perpetual Peace," has remained among the most influential. Kant was writing during the birth of the modern nation-state from the American and French Revolutions. Political theo-