

**Charles Taylor .  
Modern Social Imaginaries.**

Duke University Press, 2004, 232 pp.

\$US 18.95 paper (0-8223-3293-0), \$US 64.95 hardcover (0-8223-3255-8)

Under this rather dry title, Charles Taylor addresses what he calls the central problem of the human sciences: the origins of modernity, as a set of institutions, ways of living and even social 'malaise' that has left no place untouched. More specifically, Taylor asks whether we can compare Western and Non-western paths of modernity. Can we speak in the same breath of the modernization of France and the modernity pursued by the other famous Charles Taylor, the dictator of Liberia? Are we dealing with a single process or many? Are there multiple modernities?

Other writers, Fredric Jameson for instance, have addressed this problem by distinguishing between modernity and modernization, where modernization is the installation of technical and social apparatuses, and modernity is something like how we feel about these. This seems like a useful approach because our consciousness of the process can vary greatly for lots of reasons — cultural and otherwise. Taylor avoids this kind of solution because it reeks of materialism and simple determination. He wants a more reflexive, hermeneutic account of the rise and spread of modernity.

Taylor proceeds instead by distinguishing between two central elements of Western modernity, which he calls "the moral order" and "the social imaginary". The moral order is an explicit set of ideas about how we should act, and why the social world is arranged in the way that it is. The social imaginary, on the hand, is a more elusive set of self understandings, background practices, and horizons of common expectations that are not always explicitly articulated, but that give a people a sense of a shared group life. *Modern Social Imaginaries* is a history of the 'long march' in which the modern social order, which he equates with liberal political philosophy, gives rise to, and is put to work in three central forms of social imaginary: the economy, the public sphere and popular sovereignty.

Modernity's moral order originates in the late Middle Ages but finds its mature expression in the political philosophy of Locke and Grotius. According to their versions of natural law theory, individuals have innate rights and obligations toward one another. Politics should not work toward any specific ordering of the world, but simply do whatever is most expedient to serve the individuals' search for happiness. What is radical in all of this, for Taylor at least, is that politics begins to work in the service of something non-political — the individual in his/her desire to live well. The new principle of a general equality among individuals spreads to ever more areas of social life, and demands greater kinds of equality. It is not simply the rationality of this idea that accounts for its success, however, but the way that it transformed "the social imaginary", or the lived practices in which people engage one another and develop a self understanding of their collective life.

The economy is the first of the social imaginaries in which the liberal moral order comes to life. Taylor shows that the very idea of economy changes in the seventeenth century. It is no longer seen as the management of existing resources but rather as a set of interlocking activities and background practices, which serve a mutual social benefit and promote a social harmony. The images of an intermeshing of interests and, later, Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' promote a 'self understanding' that society constitutes itself through its own actions outside the official polity. In this way, the new

moral order is put to work or ‘schematized’, as he puts it at one point, in the economic institutions of modernity.

A similar process of self-constitution takes place in the development of the modern public sphere. Here, Taylor follows fairly closely the work of Jurgen Habermas and Benedict Anderson. Civil society emerges in a kind of performative speech act. What constitutes the public is nothing other than the common action of discussing itself. Newspapers, associations and media of various kinds allowed people to form a polity of mutual interests outside the state, which nonetheless play a crucial role in the legitimization of politics.

The final form of the modern social imaginary is popular sovereignty, the invention of the people. Drawing primarily on examples from the American and French revolutions Taylor shows that in both cases the people understand themselves to be a self constituting group that exists prior to, and independent of, any formal political constitution. This is something new and different than the other ways in the people have understood themselves — as constituted in some pre-social mythic time, or following a set of ancient custom and laws.

The cumulative effect of these forms of social imaginary is to topple the pre-modern model of “hierarchical complementarity” and to replace it with a “direct access society”, in which there are no privileged institutions, or groups, and where each individual is “immediate to the whole”. It is only in this climate, Taylor wants to show, that the liberal principle of equality can be extended to ever more groups and in ever more intensive ways.

In many ways, this book reaffirms Charles Taylor’s status as Canada’s version of Richard Rorty. This is not only because he is a public intellectual with a gift for being able to discuss matters as diverse as multiculturalism, Aristotle and God, but because he mines the Nietzschean strains of European political thought — here represented in the image of society as a single horizontal plane, and a long excurses on secular time — and argues for their basic affinities with the principles of North American liberalism and pragmatism.

On a more critical note, while multiple modernities is the book’s ostensible problem, Taylor actually has very little — nothing in fact — to say about non-Western societies, or their paths to modernity. Instead, what he offers us is a method for a more precise investigation of its development in the West. It’s never made clear exactly what the implications of his thesis might be for understanding the modernization of, say, central Africa, Asia or even Newfoundland. Or, for that matter, neither does he address what counts as Western or European modernity. In the discussion of economy, for example, Taylor never addresses the role of non-Western and non European economies in Europe. What role did Indians, Jamaicans or Africans play in the new ideas of economy as mutual benefit and the images of ‘self constitution’ that required their resources but excluded their social and political participation? How might their exclusion from Europe’s own self-understanding of its modernity figure in the various post war and post colonial projects of modernization that have spurred on the debate about multiple modernities? Because he does not address questions like these, what Taylor offers us here is, in the end, something like a set of preliminary studies, or prolegomena to any further consideration of multiple modernities.

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February 2005

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