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Modern Social Imaginaries

Charles Taylor

Public Culture

Duke University Press

Volume 14, Number 1, Winter 2002

pp. 91-124

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Public Culture 14.1 (2002) 91-124

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Modern Social Imaginaries

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The number one problem of modern social science has been modernity itself. By *modernity* I mean 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 again 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 non-Western cultures have modernized in their own ways and cannot be properly understood if we try to grasp them in a general theory that was originally designed with the Western case in mind?

This essay seeks to shed light on both the original and contemporary issues about modernity by defining the self-understandings that have been constitutive of it. Western modernity in this view is inseparable from a certain kind of social imaginary, and the differences among today's multiple modernities are 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 part 3.

My aim here is a modest one. I would like to sketch an account of the forms of **[End Page 91]** social imaginary that have underpinned the rise of Western modernity. This is an essay in Western history; it does not engage the variety of today's alternative modernities.¹ But I hope that a closer definition of the Western specificity may help us see more clearly what the different paths of contemporary modernization hold in common. In writing this, I have obviously drawn heavily on the pioneering work of Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, as well as on work by Jürgen Habermas, Michael Warner, Pierre Rosanvallon, and others, which I shall acknowledge as the argument unfolds.²

My hypothesis is that central to Western modernity is a new conception of the moral order of society. At first this moral order was just an idea in the minds of some influential thinkers, but later it came to shape the social imaginary of large strata, and then eventually whole societies. It has now become so self-evident to us, 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 development of certain social forms that characterize Western modernity: the market economy, the public sphere, the self-governing people, among others.

1.

I will start with the new vision of moral order. This was most clearly stated in the new theories of natural law that emerged in the seventeenth century, largely as a response to the domestic and international disorder wrought by the Wars of Religion (1562-98). Hugo Grotius and John 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. Since the seventeenth century, this idea increasingly has come 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—what it is in aid of, how it comes to be. But any theory of this kind also provides an idea of moral order; it tells us something about how we ought to live together in society.³ **[End Page 92]**

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 one another...

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