Modern Societies

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Concepts and Realities
There is an old joke of Poincaré's asserting that natural scientists gathered together discuss results, whereas social scientists, similarly assembled, argue about their conceptual tools. This is all-too-accurate in general, and especially so in social scientific definitions of modernity. These tend to be abstract, stressing "universalism", "governmentality", and "globalization"—the visions respectively of Talcott Parsons, Michel Foucault, and of just about everyone else. These views need to be rejected both because many of the social forces that operate in modern times are recognizable from previous eras and because the uniformity of such visions hides the enormous variety of modern societies. Furthermore, there has been change within the modern world: three particular periods—inter-imperial war, the three worlds, and the contemporary situation—must be considered if we are to understand our current sense of history. If the purpose is to offer a map of modern societies, it has to be admitted that coverage in this essay is selective—how could it be otherwise? It would be possible for instance to write about the impact of changes in fertility or disease; those crucial issues are excluded here. Particular attention is paid to Europe, the region from which world wars originated, and to the changing character of nationalism within that region—and in the rest of the world.

The best place to start is by considering the viewpoint of Ernest Gellner, to my mind the most important theorist of "modernity" (Gellner 1964; Hall 2010). His claim was that the modern social contract was made up of two elements: a society would and should be seen as legitimate if it was industrialized and ruled by those co-cultural with the population as a whole. It might seem as if this amounts to a single force, for Gellner's claim was that nationalism derived from industrialism. In fact he drew a useful distinction. In general class conflict within ethnically homogeneous societies was held not to be likely to disruptive social formations. In contrast, joining social inequality with an "entropy-resistant" status category of one sort or another was and would likely remain genuine social dynamite. This is a powerful claim, forcing us to think about a force whose impact on the modern world has been very great. Further, it is important to stress that social theories gain power quite as much from what they exclude as from what they include. Gellner insisted that liberal democracy was not written into the code of the modern world—even though prescriptively he wanted and indeed worked for its extension. In this area Gellner liked to cite two arguments made by John Stuart Mill, perhaps so as to underline the fact that his own troubling conclusions had an impeccable liberal pedigree. On the one hand, Mill had noted in his Considerations on Representative Government that representative government was not possible until the nationalities question had been solved (Mill [1861] 1975, ch. 16). Differently put, the class and democracy conflict so dear to liberalism's heart could only be successfully resolved within the background of consensual national homogeneity. On the other hand, Mill also insisted, in On Liberty, that the centralization of power for development purposes was wholly justified. It was very unlikely that "traditional" social actors would choose the benefits of sobriety and political economy; social engineering was needed in order to establish a new world. "The early difficulties in the way of spontaneous progress are so great", Mill noted, that "a ruler full of the spirit of improvement is warranted in the use of any expedients" (Mill [1859] 1975, 15–16). Liberal societies had been lucky, in Gellner's view, because their development had taken place so early; all that could be hoped for elsewhere was the possibility of liberalizing once industrialization had taken place.

Although Gellner's view of modernity has much to recommend it, it is nonetheless flawed. His argumentation privileges socio-economic forces, thereby missing out politics. There are two ways in which this matters. First, it is not the case, as he imagines, that any particular set of social actors has a particular essence. To the contrary, the character of social forces in large part results from the nature of the states with which they interact. My claim will be that when states exclude, they radicalize social groups; in contrast, inclusion tends to domesticate and to pacify. We shall see that this is true of workers and nationalities, that is, of the entry of the people into politics, perhaps the
defining societal development of modern times. Secondly, Gellner paid no systematic attention to geopolitical events. But this traditional set of relations mattered in the modern world, and matters still. At this point it may be useful to characterize modern social factors in a way that differs from that of Gellner. We live in a world in which nation-states swim in the sea of capitalism, whose contours are markedly affected by the actions of the United States, the primary empire of the contemporary world.

World States at War: Causes and Consequences

In the middle of the 19th century, Europe was at the pinnacle of its power, and supremely confident that it represented the progress of civilization. The European balance of power depended on the interaction of Austro-Hungary, Prussia (the leading state in Germany), Imperial Russia, France and Great Britain. Such states sought to be world powers, as did the United States and Japan. The rivalry among these great powers could not be contained. Understanding the conflict that began in Europe—the “Dark Continent” of the 20th century (Mazower 1998)—must be our first task if we are to understand modern societies.

The rivalry among these states was such that the most immediate structural element at work was the need to industrialize. An obvious consequence that troubled ruling elites was the potential emergence of organized working classes. In fact, a whole series of sectoral divisions among workers meant that no unitary class existed in any state, let alone between them—at least when workers were left to themselves (Mann 1993). This was most clearly seen in the United States where splits between the respectable business unionism of the crafts contrasted with the radicalism of the International Workers of the World. Extreme repression of radicals combined with liberal treatment of the rest famously created a world in which workers came to consider themselves as middle class. Something of the same pattern applied in England, but the presence of limited state interference ensured that class loyalty was created—that is, socialism was avoided but a Labour Party was created. In contrast, regime exclusion did create socialist class unity. Anti-socialist laws in Prussia created a movement with political and industrial wings, formally wedded to revolutionary ideas but in fact made reformist by the speedy abolition of the laws in question. The radicalism of German workers seemed wholly ridiculous and unnecessary to Max Weber, who argued that workers would become a loyal part of the nation if accorded more substantial citizenship rights. The most interesting case was that of Imperial Russia (McDaniel 1988). Russia’s autocracy differed from European monarchies’ authoritarianism in being at times suspicious of capitalism. The desire to fully control society led to oscillating policies towards capitalism, something that in itself helped radicalize the workers of Moscow and St Petersburg. Militancy varied precisely in relation to state actions: reformists came to the fore as the result of the political opening of 1905, while revolutionaries triumphed inside the workers’ movement once concessions were abandoned. The end result of these policies was the creation of the only genuinely revolutionary working class in human history.

To consider industrialization only in terms of its impact on class would be a mistake. Every state sought the same set of industries in order to maintain geopolitical independence, and this in turn led to economic tensions—as, for example, when various steel industries sought to dump their excess product (Sen 1984). Considering Germany as the crucial late developer brings attention to three factors that do most to explain Europe’s 20th century disaster: nationalism, imperialism, and confrontational foreign policies Each factor can be seen as an extension of ideas suggested by Max Weber, namely his views on nationalism, his role as a Fleet Professor, and his views on Prussia’s conduct of foreign affairs. But these factors were at work in all the countries involved.

Max Weber’s nickname in his closest circle was “Polish Max” on account of his obsessive belief that Prussia’s Polish workers, on the East Elbian estates, would weaken the German nation. States had come to feel vulnerable when they ruled over a mass of different ethnic and national groups. Certainly, fiscal extraction was difficult when obeisance had to be paid to the historical liberties of particular regions. But the determination to copy the ethnic homogeneity of leading powers had a further element to it, namely that of seeking to strengthen the legitimacy of the state by playing the nationalist card against socialism. Accordingly, nationalism comes to the fore at the end of the 19th century at least as much from above as from below. Integration of nations within world powers was difficult. At best, peasants might be