Rejected Modernity

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Abstract: *'Modernity' originally meant Euromodernity, and only now are historians freeing themselves from Eurocentric perspective, adopting a new periodisation under the rubric of 'globalisation'. The belief in 'Progress', associated with secularisation and advancing science and technology, underlies Western imperialism. This in turn fuels the imposition of 'Modernity' upon all other countries in the world, and challenges them to adopt it or remain inferior – and often humiliated. Brief discussions follow of case studies of the largely successful adoption of 'Modernity' by Japan, China and Turkey, and its substantial rejection in the Arab Middle East. There, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, 'modernity' and its attributes have always been tainted by associated with humiliation and loss of honour and dignity. The Islamic rejection of 'Modernity', entailing weak state power, created a void into which global 'Jihadism' stepped. The exaggerated response to it, in Bush's 'War on Terror', has led in the direction of the national security state and a threat to the core principles of American democracy.*

Keywords*: modernity, globalisation, progress, imperialism, Japan, China, Turkey, Middle East, Islam*

While there are many modernities, there is general agreement as to the core features with which they have an affinity. The first is, of course, a perpetual newness. Another is a connection with political and religious freedoms. The former manifests itself in an embrace of free speech, freedom of forming political parties, freedom of dissent, and freedom of congregating together in public. In regard to the latter it manifests itself in the form of religious tolerance and separation of state and church.

What also must be noted is that, as my friend and colleague, Kenneth Weisbrode reminds me, 'Modernity' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was Euromodernity. To deny this fact is to deny history. One consequence of this fact has been a persistent Eurocentrism. Only now, with the processes of globalisation increasing, are historians freeing themselves from this perspective. A new periodisation is taking place, with the rubric of Globalisation displacing that of Modernity to describe the last 50 years or so after the Second World War (for more details, see Mazlish 2014).Whether most politicians have freed themselves from the old perspective is debateable.

By the seventeenth century, the pursuit of science by an agreed upon method, was central to intellectual activity. First in the natural sciences, it then spread to the human sciences. Reason was emphasised and a rejection of tradition was prominent. Truth is sought in reality, not in texts. Religion is displaced from the commanding heights of education and intellectual and cultural discourse. In an increasingly secularised society, philosophy triumphs more and more over theology. Key figures in this development are Francis Bacon and René Descartes.

This development is seen as progressive. In Western Europe, belief in Progress is a distinguishing mark of the modern spirit from the seventeenth century through to the eighteenth century Enlightenment and indeed to the nineteenth century. The emphasis on technology as well as science characterises Western countries, and is

the motor behind their imperialism. That imperialism fuels the imposition of Modernity upon all other countries in the world and challenges them to adapt to it or to remain inferior. And often humiliated.

It becomes ever more clear to the victims that they must somehow or other deal with the issue of Modernity. I will try to illustrate this point by a number of cases, some making a successful accommodation between the new and their own traditions, while others less successfully attempt to reject Modernity.

1. The shining example of success in adapting to Modernity is nineteenth-century Japan. Following upon its 'opening' by Commodore Perry in 1854, the Meiji regime dispatched in 1871 the famous Iwakura mission of 50 senior officers for almost two years of study abroad. The Chinese scholar Feng Guifen (1809–1874) had come to believe that 'one of the keys to Western strength was the 'closeness between the ruler and the people' (Schell and Delury 2013: 47). Taking this insight seriously, the Meiji regime instituted a modern Western constitution in 1889, Asia's first.

Japan's success in appropriating Western political and technological innovations was exemplified by its 1894 victory over China and even more so in its triumph over Russia in 1904. Chinese intellectuals recognising these events attributed them to Japan's successful adaptation to Modernity. Now China needed to 'copy' Japan. Liang Qiacho (1873–1929), one of the most advanced and influential of Chinese thinkers, was extremely vocal in proclaiming this position; indeed, he did so especially after having spent some time in Japan.

He argued, as Schell and Delury have put it, 'that China's revival would require the wholesale destruction of the cultural tradition [...] holding back his country's progress, and the creation of a whole new national self in its place' (2013: 92). He reinterpreted Confucius 'as a radical political reformer leading toward a utopian end rather than an interminable series of repetitive dynastic cycles.' (2013: 94) In Shanghai, Liang Qiacho became editor of a new newspaper, convinced that a dynamic popular press was a key to national strength.

He lauded Francis Bacon and his New Atlantis and argued that 'Those who open themselves to the new will prosper and grow strong.' (Schell & Delury: 2013) Although it took another century, China followed his advice has grown strong, adapting to modernity with a Chinese character. Although China's traditions went back to a proud 5,000-year-old civilisation, it brought them into accord with the new, and has made a successful transition to its own version of modernity, one different from the politically free and individual right-bearing version to be found in the West.

2. In Japan and China we have found what can be described as affirmative adaptations to modernity. Let us now look at modern-day Turkey for another case study. It is strongly connected to one man, Kemal Ataturk Pasha. He marks the shift from the Ottoman Caliphate to the Turkish Republic. In the early part of his life, Kemal Pasha served in the Sultan's army. The fact is that Ataturk was a military genius, probably greater than Napoleon. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, it seemed likely that a Turkish nation would die with it. This did not happen, because of Ataturk's defeat of the Greeks and others and his establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1921.

With Ataturk as President from 1923 to 1938 the country entered on the path to Modernity. Its steps were marked by the writing of a Constitution in 1921, expanded in 1924. This established a representative democracy and parliamentary supremacy. The rule of Islam and clerics had to go. In 1924, shariah courts and

their law were abolished. Education passed into the hands of the state. The philosopher and educator John Dewey was consulted. Boys and girls were to be educated together.

Turks were encouraged to wear European dress – in fact, a Hat Law was passed in 1925 to encourage the use of Western style hats instead of the fez. Following the maxim that clothes make the man, outer garments were expected to change the inner man. With the watchwords of 'progress and civilisation', Turkey forged ahead to Modernity. A new Turkish alphabet, closer to the Latin was introduced, replacing Arabic script, and the literacy rates for both sexes soared. Istanbul University was reorganised, and later Ankara University was established in the capital city

Needless to say, there was much opposition to Ataturk's introduction of both the reality and the trappings of Modernity. In fact, as we know, the Islamic religion has partly returned under the premiership of Erdogan. The resulting mixture is an interesting one, whose outcome is still unclear.

3. For centuries what has come to be called the Middle East was under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire (Turkish part of which we have just been considering). The slow decline of that Empire continued even though it tried to adapt to Modernity as we have seen. These reforms in the nineteenth century were known as the Tanzimant. Thus, various scholars such as Rifi' al-Tahtawa, who had visited Paris for five years, argued that Islamic Law and elements of Modernity coming from the West were not necessarily incompatible.

Parts of the Empire, such as Egypt, had almost total autonomy. Here Muhammad Ali sought to borrow from the West, for example, embracing industrialisation and free trade. His efforts were critically undermined by Western powers who wished to keep the country solely as a source of raw materials, such as cotton, to be worked up in their own new textile mills. Thus, Egypt was not allowed to modernise.

The final collapse and dismemberment of the Empire occurred as a result of the First World War and the Ottomans being on the wrong side – that is, the losing side. The victors, primarily Britain and France, took control of the spoils, 'administering' them in the form of newly defined nation states, such as Syria and Iraq. Oil now became the life blood of their empires.

It must constantly be kept in mind that Modernity and its attributes in the Middle East has always borne with it the taint of Western imperialism and colonialism. It is most frequently associated with the idea of humiliation and loss of honour and dignity. It is often accompanied with the idea of poison. Resort is had to a notion of pure Islam. Yet it is also clear that Modernity is associated with wealth and power. Thus the dilemma: how to fight it without adopting some of its own weapons, while still holding on to traditions?

For example, as one scholar, Ahmed Afzaal, puts it (in a course on 'Islam and Modernity' given at Connecticut College), 'Islam is experiencing a major crisis today [...] and this crisis stems from its inability to "modernise", which is a direct result of certain inherent characteristics of the religion itself.' Let us look more closely at this thesis.

In the twelfth century AD, Islam stretched over a large part of the Mediterranean littoral, east and west. A nomadic people, the Arabs using mainly camels were a conquering people, highly mobile, spreading their language and customs as they rode forward. At this time, too, they appeared to have the most advanced civilisation to be found anywhere: in their possession were the texts of the Greek and Roman classics.

By the seventeenth century and the decline of the Ottoman Empire, whose apex may be seen in its unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1683, the Arab counties were vulnerable to the imperialist drives of the

Western powers. These were 'modern' and much of their superiority derived from that fact. Thus began the over three centuries-long challenge to Islam to come to terms with Modernity.

In 1826 Muhammad Ali, as mentioned, had sent the scholar Rif'a'a Rafi' al-Tahawi to Europe where he spent five years in Paris. As a result of his visit, he concluded that there was not much difference between the principles of Islamic law and those principles of natural law on which the codes of modern Europe were based. In short, at least in principle Islam and Modernity were compatible.

However, principle and practice were two different matters. In practice, Modernity was equated with Western imperialism and humiliation. It also threatened the monopoly on power of the mullahs, whose strength was based on the memorisation and interpretation of the Koran. These were of little use in a modern world. The German sociologist Karl Mannheim had written earlier about the sociology of knowledge, the way in which one's position in society shaped one's ideas. Clearly, the mullahs' position and training, threatened by the new learning, inclined them to reject it.

One problem was that Modernity was associated with the wealth and power that allowed the West to impose its rule and rules on the Arab societies. Their response was to retreat to tradition, the exact body of thought that Modernity with its ceaseless pursuit of the new opposed. This, however, entailed military weakness. Collapsing a long story, this fact was brought centre of stage by the Six Day War, in which the despised Israelis routed the combined armies of their Arab enemies.

The Islamic rejection of Modernity, entailing weak state power, had special consequences. The failure of Nasser and his brand of nationalism left few alternatives. Into this void stepped Osama bin-Laden and his followers in al-Qaeda. In short, global Jihad. In itself this was a pinprick. The exaggerated reaction to it – Bush's 'War on Terror' – has led in the direction of the national security state and a threat to the core principles of democracy in America.

Conclusion

This discussion may be briefly summarised as follows. Those countries, such as Japan and China, that have adapted their culture to Modernity, have gone on to both wealth and power. Turkey, too, has mainly succeeded in fusing its traditions and the modern, but this fusion seems increasingly in peril. Arab Middle East countries such as Syria and Iraq are riven by religious and ethnic strife, and subject to the intentions of outside forces; outcomes here are quite unpredictable.

Our final conclusion is that rejecting Modernity, and now the globalisation following upon it, is a perilous course both for the nations involved and for the world around them. Ours is a time of troubles, especially in the Middle East. Here it seems that rejection of the modern will continue, ensuring weakness and poverty for the people of the area. With a surging population – for example, Egypt has now gone beyond 82 million – the prognosis is not favourable.

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Biographical Note

Bruce Mazlish is Professor of History Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he taught from 1955 to 2003. He is the author of a great many books, including *The Western Intellectual Tradition: from Leonardo to Hegel*, with Jacob Bronowski (1960), *A New Science: The Breakdown of Connections and the Birth of Sociology* (1989), *The Uncertain Sciences* (1998), and most recently *Reflections on the Modern and the Global* (2014). He has been a pioneer of psychohistory, as seen for example in *Kissinger: The European Mind in American Policy* (1976), was a founder of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* and *History and Theory*.

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