
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

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.

I.

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

1. Cf. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

3. Grotius's *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* [The law of war and peace] is the relevant work for our discussion.

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. The ends sought are certain common benefits, of which security is the most important.

The underlying idea of moral order stresses the rights and obligations that individuals have in regard to one another, even prior to or outside of the political bond. Political obligations are seen as an extension or application of these more fundamental moral ties. Political authority itself is legitimate only because it was consented to by individuals (the original contract), and this contract creates binding obligations in virtue of the preexisting principle that promises should be kept.

It is Locke who first uses this theory as a justification of “revolution” and as a ground for limited government. Rights can now be seriously pleaded against power. Consent is not just an original agreement to set up government, but a continuing right to agree to taxation. Although the contract language may fall away and be used only by a minority of theorists, for the next three centuries the underlying idea of society as existing for the (mutual) benefit of individuals—and the defense of their rights—takes on increasing importance. That is, it not only comes to be the dominant view, pushing older theories of society or newer rivals to the margins of political life and discourse, but it also generates more and more far-reaching claims on political life. The requirement of original consent, via the halfway house of Locke’s consent to taxation, becomes the full-fledged doctrine of popular sovereignty under which we now live. The theory of natural rights ends up spawning a dense web of limits to legislative and executive action by way of the entrenched charters that have become an important feature of contemporary government. The presumption of equality, implicit in the starting point of the state of nature, where people stand outside of all relations of superiority and inferiority, has been applied in a growing number of contexts, resulting in equal opportunity or nondiscrimination provisions, which are an integral part of most entrenched charters of rights.

In other words, during these last four centuries, the idea of moral order implicit in this view of society has undergone a double expansion: (1) in extension—more people live by it, it has become dominant; and (2) in intensity—the demands it makes are heavier and more ramified. The idea has gone through a series of “redactions,” as it were, each richer and more demanding than the previous one, up to the present day.

It is clear that the images of moral order which descend through a series of transformations from that inscribed in the natural law theories of Grotius and

Locke are rather different from those embedded in the social imaginary of the premodern age.

Two important types of premodern moral order are worth singling out, because we can see them being gradually taken over, displaced, or marginalized by the Grotian-Lockean strand during the transition to political modernity. One is based on the idea of the *law* of a people, a law that has existed “time out of mind,” and which in a sense defines a group as a people. This idea seems to have been widespread among the Indo-European tribes who at various stages erupted into Europe. It was very powerful in seventeenth-century England, under the guise of the ancient constitution, and became one of the key justifying ideas of the rebellion against the king in the civil war of the 1640s. From this example it is clear that these notions are not always conservative in import, but we should also include in this category the sense of normative order that seems to have been carried on through generations in peasant communities and out of which they developed a picture of the “moral economy,” from which they could criticize the burdens laid on them by landlords or the exactions levied on them by state and church.⁴ Here again, the recurring idea seems to have been that an original acceptable distribution of burdens had been displaced by usurpation and should be rolled back.

The other type of premodern moral order is organized around a notion of a hierarchy in society that expresses and corresponds to a hierarchy in the cosmos. These were often theorized in language drawn from the Platonic-Aristotelian concept of Form, but the underlying notion also emerges strongly in theories of correspondence (e.g., the king is in his kingdom, as the lion among animals, the eagle among birds, and so forth). From these theories the idea emerges that disorders in the human realm will resonate in nature, because the very order of things is threatened. The night on which Duncan was murdered was disturbed by “lamentings heard i’ th’ air, strange screams of death,” and it remained dark even though day should have started. On the previous Tuesday, a falcon had been killed by a mousing owl, and Duncan’s horses turned wild in the night, “contending ’gainst obedience, as they would make / War with mankind.”⁵

In both these cases—and particularly in the second—we have an order that tends to impose itself by the course of things: violations are met with backlash that transcends the merely human realm. This is a very common feature of pre-

4. The term *moral economy* is borrowed from E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1964).

5. *Macbeth* 2.3.56; 2.4.17–18.

modern ideas of moral order. Greek philosopher Anaximander likens any deviation from the course of nature to injustice; he says that things that resist it must eventually “pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of time.”⁶ And certainly the Platonic forms are active in shaping the things and events in the world of change.

In these cases, it is very clear that a moral order is more than just a set of norms; it also contains what we might call an “ontic” component, identifying features of the world that make the norms realizable. In contrast, the modern order that descends from Grotius and Locke is not self-realizing in the sense invoked by Hesiod or Plato or by the cosmic reactions to Duncan’s murder. It is therefore tempting to think that our modern notions of moral order lack altogether an ontic component. But this would be a mistake, as I hope to show later. Realization is also an element of the modern moral order—but the emphasis is on humans rather than on God or the cosmos.

To recognize what is peculiar to our modern understanding of order, it will help to look at how the idealizations of natural law theory differ from those that were dominant before. Premodern social imaginaries, especially those of the second type mentioned above, were structured by various modes of hierarchical complementarity. Society was seen as being made up of different orders that needed and complemented one another. This didn’t mean that their relations were truly mutual, because they didn’t exist on the same level. Rather, they formed a hierarchy in which some had greater dignity and value than the others. An example is the often repeated medieval idealization of the society of three orders: *oratores*, *bellatores*, and *laboratores*—those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. It was clear that each needed the others, but there was also a descending scale of dignity; some functions were intrinsically higher than others.

The distribution of functions is itself a key part of the normative order. It is not just that each order ought to perform its characteristic function for the others, assuming they have entered these relations of exchange. No, the hierarchical differentiation itself is seen as the proper order of things. It was part of the nature or form of society. In the Platonic and neo-Platonic traditions, as I have just mentioned, this form was already at work in the world, and any attempt to deviate from it turned reality against itself. Society would be denatured in the attempt. Hence the tremendous power of the organic metaphor in these earlier theories. The organism seems to be the paradigmatic locus of forms at work, striving to

6. Quoted in Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 19.

heal its wounds and cure its maladies. And at the same time, the arrangement of functions that it exhibits is not simply contingent, it is “normal” and right. That the feet are below the head is how it should be.

In contrast, the basic point of the new normative order was the mutual respect and mutual service of the individuals who make up society. The actual structures were meant to serve these ends, and were judged instrumentally in this light. The difference might be obscured by the fact that the older orders also ensured a kind of mutual service: the clergy pray for the laity, and the laity defend and work for the clergy. The crucial point, however, is the hierarchical division into types. With the new normative order, we start with individuals and their debt of mutual service; the divisions emerge as a way to most effectively discharge this debt.

We can see the difference between new and old orders, if we look at how Plato, in book 2 of the *Republic*, starts out by reasoning from the non-self-sufficiency of the individual to the need for an order of mutual service. Quite rapidly it becomes clear that the basic point is the structure of this order. And any doubt is removed when we see that this order is meant to stand in analogy and interaction with the normative order in the soul. By contrast, in the modern ideal, the whole point is the mutual respect and service, however achieved.

Moreover, our primary service to one another was the provision of collective security (to use the language of a later age), to render our lives and property safe under law. But we also serve one another in practicing economic exchange. These two main ends, security and prosperity, are now the principal goals of organized society, which itself can be seen as a type of profitable exchange between its constituent members. The ideal social order is one in which our purposes mesh, and each in furthering oneself helps the others.

This ideal order was not thought to be a mere human invention: it was designed by God, and everything within it coheres according to God’s purposes. Later in the eighteenth century, the same model is projected on the cosmos in a vision of the universe as a set of perfectly interlocking parts, in which the purposes of each kind of creature mesh with those of all the others. This God-given order sets the goal for our constructive activity insofar as it lies within our power to upset it or realize it. Of course, when we look at the whole, we see how much the order is already realized, but when we cast our eye on human affairs, we see how much we have deviated from it and upset it; it becomes the norm to which we should strive to return.

This order was thought to be evident in the nature of things. Of course, if we consult Revelation, we will also find the demand formulated there that we abide

by it. But reason alone can tell us God's purposes. Living things, including ourselves, strive to preserve themselves. This is God's doing. As Locke writes,

God having made Man, and planted in him, as in all other Animals, a strong desire of Self-preservation, and furnished the World with things fit for Food and Rayment and other Necessaries of Life, Subservient to his design, that Man should live and abide for some time upon the Face of the Earth, and not that so curious and wonderful a piece of Workmanship by its own Negligence, or want of Necessities, should perish again. . . . God . . . spoke to him, (that is) directed him by his Senses and Reason, . . . to the use of those things, which were serviceable for his Subsistence, and given him as means of his Preservation. . . . For the desire, strong desire of Preserving his Life and Being having been planted in him, as a Principle of Action by God himself, Reason, which was the voice of God in him, could not but teach him and assure him, that pursuing that natural Inclination he had to preserve his Being, he followed the Will of his Maker. . . .⁷

Being endowed with reason, we see that not only our lives but those of all humans are to be preserved. And in addition, God made us sociable beings. So that "every one as he is bound to preserve himself, and not quit his Station wilfully; so by the like reason when his Preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of Mankind."⁸

Similarly Locke reasons that God gave us our powers of reason and discipline so that we could most effectively go about the business of preserving ourselves. It follows that we ought to be "Industrious and Rational."⁹ The ethic of discipline and improvement is itself a requirement of the natural order that God had designed. Even the need for human will to impose order is an integral part of God's scheme.

We can see in Locke's formulation that he views mutual service in terms of profitable exchange. "Economic" (that is, ordered, peaceful, productive) activity has become the model for human behavior and the key for harmonious coexistence. In contrast to the theories of hierarchical complementarity, we meet in a zone of concord and mutual service, not to the extent that we transcend our ordinary goals and purposes, but rather in the process of carrying them out according to God's design.

7. Locke *Two Treatises of Civil Government* 1.86.

8. Locke *Two Treatises* 2.6; see also 2.135 and Locke *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* par. 116.

9. Locke *Two Treatises* 2.26.

This idealization of mutual benefit was at the outset profoundly out of sync with the way things in fact ran, thus with the effective social imaginary on just about every level of society. Hierarchical complementarity was the principle on which people's lives operated in practice, all the way from the kingdom, to the city, to the diocese, to the parish, to the clan and the family. We still have some lively sense of this disparity in the case of the family, because it is really only in our time that the older images of hierarchical complementarity between men and women are being comprehensively challenged. But this is a late stage on a "long march," a process in which the modern idealization has connected up with and transformed our social imaginary on virtually every level, with revolutionary consequences.

The very revolutionary nature of the consequences ensured that those who first took up this theory would fail to see its application in a host of areas that seem obvious to us today. The powerful hold of hierarchically complementary forms of life—in the family, between master and servant in the household, between lord and peasant on the domain, between educated elite and the masses—made it seem "evident" that the new principle of order ought to be applied only within certain bounds. This was often not even perceived as a restriction. What seems to us flagrant inconsistency, when eighteenth-century Whigs defended their oligarchic power in the name of the "people," for instance, was for the Whig leaders themselves just common sense.

In fact, they were drawing on an older understanding of "people," one stemming from a premodern notion of order, of the first type I mentioned above, in which a people is constituted as such by a law that always already exists, time out of mind. This law can confer leadership on some elements, who thus quite naturally speak for the people. Even revolutions (as we would term them) in early modern Europe were carried out under this understanding—as for instance, the antimonarchists in the French Wars of Religion, who accorded the right to rebel not to the unorganized masses but to the "subordinate magistrates." This was also the basis of Parliament's rebellion against Charles I.

And this long march is perhaps ending only today. Or perhaps we too are victims of a mental restriction, for which our posterity will accuse us of inconsistency or hypocrisy. In any case, some very important stages of this journey happened very recently. I have mentioned contemporary gender relations in this regard. But we should also remember that it wasn't very long ago when whole segments of our supposedly modern society remained outside of this modern social imaginary. As Eugen Weber has shown, many communities of French

peasants were transformed only late in the nineteenth century and inducted into France as a nation of 40 million individual citizens.¹⁰

This history is easy to forget, because once we are well installed in the modern social imaginary, it seems the only possible one, the only one that makes sense. After all, are we not all individuals? Do we not associate in society for our mutual benefit? How else to measure social life?

Our limited perspective makes it very easy for us to entertain a quite distorted view of the process in two respects. First, we tend to read the march of this new principle of order and its displacing of traditional modes of complementarity as the rise of “individualism” at the expense of “community.” As a result, we fail to recognize that the inevitable flip side of the new understanding of the individual is a new understanding of sociality: the society of mutual benefit, whose functional differentiations are ultimately contingent and whose members are fundamentally equal. This is what I have been insisting on in these pages, precisely because it generally gets lost from view. The individual seems primary because we read the displacement of older forms of complementarity as the erosion of community as such. We seem to be left with a standing problem of how to induce or force the individual into some kind of social order, make him or her conform and obey the rules.

This recurrent experience of breakdown is real enough. But it need not mask the fact that modernity is also the rise of new principles of sociality. As we can see with the case of the French Revolution, breakdown occurs when people are expelled from their old forms, through war, revolution, or rapid economic change, before they can find their way in the new structures, that is, connect some transformed practices to the new principles to form a viable social imaginary. But this doesn't show that modern individualism is by its very essence a solvent of community or that the modern political predicament is that defined by Hobbes: How do we rescue atomic individuals from the prisoner's dilemma? The real, recurring problem has been better defined by Tocqueville, or in our day François Furet.

The second distortion is a familiar one. The modern principle seems to us so self-evident—are we not by nature and essence individuals?—that we are tempted by a “subtraction” account of the rise of modernity. We just needed to liberate ourselves from the old horizons, and then the mutual service conception of order was the obvious remaining alternative. It needed no inventive insight or con-

10. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979), chap. 28.

structive effort. Individualism and mutual benefit are the evident residual ideas that remain after you have sloughed off the older religions and metaphysics.

But the reverse is the case. Humans have lived for most of their history in modes of complementarity, mixed with a greater and lesser degree of hierarchy. There have been islands of equality, like that of the citizens of the polis, but they are set in a sea of hierarchy once you replace them in the bigger picture. And these societies were certainly alien to modern individualism. What is rather surprising is that it was possible to achieve modern individualism—not just on the level of theory, but also transforming and penetrating the social imaginary. Now that this imaginary has become linked with societies of unprecedented power in human history, it seems impossible and mad to try to resist. But we must not commit the anachronism of thinking that this was always the case. The best antidote to this error is to recall some of the phases of the long and often conflictual march by which this theory has ended up achieving such a hold on our imagination.

Summing up, we can say that (1) the order of mutual benefit holds between individuals (or at least moral agents who are independent of larger hierarchical orders); (2) the benefits crucially include life and the means to live, however securing these relates to the practice of virtue; (3) it is meant to secure freedom, and easily finds expression in terms of rights. To these we can add a fourth point: these rights, this freedom, this mutual benefit is to be secured to all participants equally. Exactly what is meant by equality will vary, but that it must be affirmed in some form follows from the rejection of hierarchical order. These are the crucial features, the constants that recur in the modern idea of moral order, through its varying “redactions.”

2.

I mentioned above that this new notion of order brought about a change in the understanding of the cosmos as the work of God’s Providence. We have here in fact one of the earliest examples of the new model of order moving beyond its original niche and reshaping the image of God’s providential rule.

The notion that God governs the world according to a benign plan was ancient, even pre-Christian, with roots in Judaism as well as Stoicism. What is new is the way of conceiving his benevolent scheme. We can see this in arguments ranging from the design of the world to the existence of a good creator God. Formerly, these arguments insisted on the magnificent design of the whole framework in which our world was set (e.g., the stars, the planets), and then on the admirable microdesign of creatures, including ourselves, with our organs fit-

ted for their functions, as well as on the general way in which life was sustained by the processes of nature. These elements certainly remain part of the conception of a moral order, but what is added in the eighteenth century is an appreciation of the way in which human life is designed so as to produce mutual benefit. Emphasis is sometimes laid on mutual benevolence, but very often the happy design is identified in the existence of what one might call “invisible hand” factors. By this I mean actions and attitudes that we are “programmed” for, which have systematically beneficent results for the general happiness, even though these are not part of what is intended in the action or affirmed in the attitude. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith has provided us with the most famous of these mechanisms, whereby our search for our own individual prosperity redounds to the general welfare. But there are other examples: in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith argues that nature has made us admire greatly rank and fortune because social order is much more secure if it rests on the respect for visible distinctions, rather than on the less striking qualities of virtue and wisdom.¹¹

The order here is that of a good engineering design, in which efficient causation plays the crucial role. In this it differs from earlier notions of order, where the harmony comes from the consonance between the ideas or forms manifested in the different levels of being or ranks in society. The crucial thing in the new conception is that our purposes mesh, however divergent they may be in the consciousness of each of us. They involve us in an exchange of advantages. We admire and support the rich and well-born, and in return we enjoy the kind of stable order without which prosperity would be impossible. God’s design is one of interlocking causes, not of harmonized meanings.

We can also see this order as an exchange of services. The fundamental model seems to be what we have come to call an economy. This new understanding of Providence is already evident in Locke’s formulation of natural law theory in the *Second Treatise*. Here we begin to glimpse the great importance of the economic dimension in the new notion of order. There are two facets to this economic dimension. The first is metaphoric: the main goals of organized society were security and economic prosperity, but because the whole theory emphasized a kind of profitable exchange, one could begin to see political society itself through a quasi-economic metaphor.

Indeed no less a personage than Louis XIV, in the advice he offers to his dauphin, subscribes to something like an exchange view: “All these different

11. Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1991), 2:72.

conditions that compose the world are united to each other only by an exchange of reciprocal obligations. The deference and respect that we receive from our subjects are not a free gift from them but payment for the justice and protection they expect to receive from us.”¹²

This example, incidentally, points to an important transition stage on the long march of the order of mutual benefit into our social imaginary. There was a rival model of order based on command and hierarchy. Louis and his contemporaries can be seen as offering a compromise between the new and the old. The basic justifying reasoning of the different functions—in this case of ruler and subject—is new; it’s given in terms of the necessary and fruitful exchange of services. But what is justified is still a hierarchical society and, above all, the most radical hierarchical relation, that of absolute monarch to subject. The justification is more and more in terms of functional necessity, but the master images still reflect something of inherent superiority, an ontological hierarchy. The king, by being above everyone else, can hold society together and sustain everything. He is like the sun, to use Louis’s favorite image.¹³

We might call this the “baroque” solution, except that its most spectacular example—Versailles—saw itself in “classical” terms. It is this compromise that reigns for a while over most of Europe, sustaining regimes with much of the pomp, ritual, and imagery of hierarchical complementarity, but on the basis of a justification drawn increasingly from the modern order. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet’s defense of Louis’s absolute rule is delivered in the same register.

The second facet of the new order’s economic dimension is more than metaphorical. A strong economy eventually came to be seen as the collective goal of society. Contemporary with Louis’s memoir of advice, Antoine de Montchrétien offers a theory of the state that sees it primarily as the orchestrating power which can make an economy flourish. (It is he, incidentally, who seems to have coined the term *political economy*.) Merchants act for love of gain, but good policy by the ruler (a still visible hand) can draw this toward the common good.¹⁴

This second facet reflects feature two of the modern order in my sketch above: the mutual benefit we are meant to confer on one another gives a crucial place to the securing of life and the means to live. This is not an isolated change within

12. *Mémoires de Louis XIV: Ecrit par lui-même et adressés à son fils* (Paris: Imprimerie Daragnes: Nouvelles Editions Publicitaires, 1957), 63, cited in Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 248.

13. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, 249–51.

14. See the discussion of Montchrétien in Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France*, 164–67.

theories of Providence; it goes along with a major trend of the age. This trend is often understood in terms of the standard “materialist” explanations; for instance, the old Marxist account that business classes, merchants, and later on, manufacturers were becoming increasingly numerous and powerful. This simple materialist account could be augmented with a reference to the changing demands of state power. Governing elites gradually became aware that increased production and favorable exchange were key elements of political and military power. The experiences of Holland and England demonstrated that. And, of course, once some nations began to “develop” economically, their rivals were forced to follow suit, or be relegated to dependent status. These sorts of political calculations, as much if not more than growing numbers and wealth, were responsible for the enhanced position of commercial classes.

These materialist accounts are important, but following Max Weber, I don’t believe they take us to the origins of this change. In other words, I think that more production came about first, and then its military/political advantages began to be plain for all to see, and hence it became an object of policy.

What started us on this path, I believe, were certain political and even spiritual changes. Here I think Weber is right, even if not all the detail of his theory can be salvaged. The original importance of people working steadily in a profession came from the fact that they thereby placed themselves in “settled courses.” If ordered life became a demand, not just for a military or spiritual/intellectual elite, but for the mass of ordinary people, then they had to become ordered and serious about what they were doing and of necessity had to be working in some productive occupation. A really ordered society requires that one take these economic occupations seriously and prescribe a discipline for them. This was the “political” ground.

But in Reformed Christianity, and to a growing extent among Catholics as well, there was a spiritual reason, which was the one Weber picked up on. To put it in the Reformed variant: If we reject the Catholic idea that there are some higher vocations (e.g., the monastic life) and claim that all Christians must be 100 percent Christian, regardless of vocation, then one must claim that ordinary life, the life of the vast majority, the life of production and the family, work, and sex is as hallowed as any other. Indeed, it is more sanctified than monastic celibacy, which is based on the vain and prideful claim to have found a higher way.

This is the basis for the sanctification of ordinary life, which I want to claim has had a tremendous and formative effect on our civilization, spilling beyond the original religious variant into myriad secular forms. It has two facets: (1) it

promotes ordinary life, as a site for the highest forms of Christian life; and (2) it has an anti-elitist thrust: it takes down those allegedly higher modes of existence, whether in the Church (monastic vocations), or in the world (ancient-derived ethics that place contemplation higher than productive existence). The mighty are cast down from their seats, and the humble and meek are exalted. Both these facets have been formative of modern civilization. The first is indicated by the central place given to the economic in our lives and the tremendous importance we put on family life or “relationships.” The second underlies the fundamental importance of equality in our social and political lives.

All these factors, material and spiritual, help explain the gradual promotion of the economic to its central place, a promotion already clearly visible in the eighteenth century. And at that time, another factor enters—or perhaps it is simply an extension of the “political” one above. The notion that economic activity is the path to peace and orderly existence gains more widespread acceptance. *Le doux commerce* is contrasted with the wild destructiveness of the aristocratic search for military glory. The more a society turns to commerce, the more “polished” and civilized it becomes, the more it excels in the arts of peace. The impetus to make money is seen as a “calm passion.” When it takes hold in a society, it can help to control and inhibit the violent passions. Or put in other language, money-making serves our “interest,” and interest can check and control passion.¹⁵ Kant even believed that as nations become republics, and hence more under the control of their ordinary, economic-minded taxpayers, recourse to war will become rarer and rarer.

The new economic-centered notion of natural order underlies the doctrines of harmony of interest. It is even reflected in the eighteenth-century vision of cosmic order, not as a hierarchy of forms-at-work, but as a chain of beings whose purposes mesh with one another. Things cohere, because they serve each other in their survival and flourishing. They form an ideal economy. As Alexander Pope writes:

See dying vegetables life sustain,
See life dissolving vegetate again:
All forms that perish other forms supply,
(By turns we catch the vital breath, and die)
Like bubbles on the sea of Matter born,

15. Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977). I am greatly indebted to the discussion in this extremely interesting book.

They rise, they break, and to that sea return.
Nothing is foreign: Parts relate to whole;
One all-extending, all preserving Soul
Connects each being, greatest with the least;
Made Beast in aid of Man, and Man of Beast;
All served, all serving: nothing stands alone;
The chain holds on, and where it ends, unknown.

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God, in nature of each being, founds
Its proper bliss, and sets its proper bounds;
But as he framed a Whole, the Whole to bless,
On mutual Wants built mutual Happiness:
So from the first, eternal ORDER ran,
And creature linked to creature, Man to Man.¹⁶

From all this, Pope triumphantly concludes “that true SELF-LOVE and SOCIAL are the same.”¹⁷

And so perhaps the first big shift wrought by this new idea of order, both in theory and in social imaginary, consists in our coming to see society as an “economy,” an interlocking set of activities of production, exchange, and consumption, which form a system with its own laws and dynamic. Instead of being merely the management, by those in authority, of the resources we collectively need, in household or state, the economic now defines a way in which we are linked together, a sphere of coexistence that could in principle suffice to itself, if only disorder and conflict didn’t threaten. Conceiving of the economy as a system is an achievement of eighteenth-century theorists (e.g., the Physiocrats and Adam Smith), but coming to see the most important purpose and agenda of society as economic collaboration and exchange is a drift in our social imaginary, which begins in that period and continues to this day. From that point on, organized society is no longer equivalent to the polity; other dimensions of social existence are seen as having their own forms and integrity. The very shift in this period of the meaning of the term *civil society* reflects this.

3.

I have just invoked the move from theory to social imaginary in connection with this new consciousness of society as an economy. But the eighteenth century sees

16. Pope *Essay on Man* 3.15–26, 109–14.

17. Pope *Essay on Man* 4.396.

other, perhaps even more fateful such moves. I want to describe two of these moves, which have helped shape our world. But first I will have to clarify my key term.

I have several times used the term *social imaginary* in the preceding pages. The time has come to make what is involved a little clearer. What I'm trying to get at with this term is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather of the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.

I want to speak of social imaginary here, rather than social theory, because there are important—and multiple—differences between the two. I speak of *imaginary* because I'm talking about the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends. But it is also the case that theory is usually the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy. In addition, we should note that what start off as theories held by a few people may come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first that of elites, perhaps, and then of society as a whole. This is what has happened, *grosso modo*, to the theories of Grotius and Locke, although the transformations have been many along the way, and the ultimate forms are rather varied.

Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of one another, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. This understanding is both factual and “normative”; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice. Take our practice of choosing governments through general elections. Part of the implicit knowledge that makes sense of each act of voting is our awareness of the whole action, involving all citizens, each choosing individually, but from among the same alternatives, and the compounding of these microchoices into one binding, collective decision. Essential to our understanding of what is involved in this kind of macrodecision is our ability to identify what would constitute a foul: certain

kinds of influence, buying votes, threats, and the like. In other words, this kind of macrodecision has to meet certain norms, if it is to be what it is meant to be. For instance, if a minority could force all others to conform to its orders, it would cease to be a democratic decision.

Implicit in this understanding of the norms is the ability to recognize ideal cases, for example, an election in which each citizen exercised to the maximum his or her judgment autonomously or in which everyone was heard. And beyond the ideal stands some notion of a moral or metaphysical order, in the context of which the norms and ideals make sense.

What I'm calling the social imaginary extends beyond the immediate background understanding that makes sense of our particular practices. This is not an arbitrary extension of the concept, because just as the practice without the understanding wouldn't make sense for us and thus wouldn't be possible, so this understanding necessarily supposes a wider grasp of our whole predicament, how we stand in relationship to one another, how we got where we are, how we relate to other groups.

This wider grasp has no clear limits. That's the very nature of what contemporary philosophers have described as the "background."¹⁸ It is in fact that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world become evident. It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its very unlimited and indefinite nature. That is another reason for speaking here of an imaginary, not a theory.

The relation between practices and the background understanding behind them is therefore not one-sided. If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that the practice largely carries the understanding. At any given time, we can speak of the "repertory" of collective actions at the disposal of a given sector of society. These are the common actions that they know how to undertake, all the way from the general election, involving the whole society, to knowing how to strike up a polite but uninvolved conversation with a casual group in the reception hall. The discriminations we have to make to carry these off, knowing whom to speak to and when and how, carry an implicit map of social space, of what kinds of people we can associate with, in what ways, and under what circumstances. Perhaps I don't initiate the conversation at all, if the

18. See the discussion in Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Michael Polanyi.

group members are all socially superior to me, or outrank me in the bureaucracy, or are all women.

This implicit grasp of social space is unlike a theoretical description of this space, distinguishing different kinds of people, and the norms connected to them. The understanding expressed in practice stands to social theory the way that my ability to get around a familiar environment stands to a (literal) map of this area. I am able to orient myself without ever having adopted the standpoint of overview that the map offers me. And similarly, for most of human history and most of social life, we function through the grasp we have on the common repertory, without benefit of theoretical overview. Humans operated with a social imaginary well before they ever got into the business of theorizing about themselves.¹⁹

Another example might help make the width and depth of this implicit understanding more palpable. Let's say we organize a demonstration. This means that this act is already in our repertory. We know how to assemble, pick up banners, and march. We know that this is meant to be within certain bounds, spatially (don't invade certain spaces), and in the way it impinges on others (this side of a threshold of aggressivity; no violence). We understand the ritual.

The background understanding that makes this act possible for us is complex, but part of what makes sense of it is the picture of ourselves as speaking to others to whom we are related in a certain way—say, compatriots or the human race. There is a speech act here, addresser and addressees, and some understanding of how they stand in this relation to each other. There are public spaces; we are already in some kind of conversation with each other. Like all speech acts, this one is addressed to a previously spoken word, in the prospect of a to-be-spoken word.²⁰

19. The way in which the social imaginary extends well beyond what has been (or even can be) theorized is illustrated in Francis Fukuyama's interesting discussion of the economics of social trust. Some economies find it difficult to build large-scale, nonstate enterprises, because a climate of trust that extends wider than the family is absent or weak. The social imaginary in these societies marks discriminations—between kin and nonkin—for purposes of economic association; these sorts of categorizations have gone largely unremarked in theories of the economy. And governments can be induced to adopt policies, legal changes, and incentives on the assumption that forming enterprises of any scale is there in the repertory and just needs encouragement. But the sense of a sharp boundary of mutual reliability around the family may severely restrict the repertory, however much it might be possible to people that they would be better off changing their way of doing business. The implicit "map" of social space has deep fissures, which are profoundly anchored in culture and imaginary, beyond the reach of correction by better theory. See Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

20. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

The mode of address says something about the footing we stand on with our addressees. The action is forceful; it is meant to impress, perhaps even to threaten certain consequences if our message is not heard. But it is also meant to persuade; it remains on this side of violence. It figures the addressee as one who can and must be reasoned with.

The immediate sense of what we're doing (e.g., getting the message to the government and our fellow citizens that the budget cuts must stop) makes sense in a wider context, in which we see ourselves as standing in a continuing relation with others, in which it is appropriate to address them in this manner, and not, for example, by humble supplication or threats of armed insurrection. We can gesture quickly at all this by saying that this kind of demonstration has its normal place in a stable, ordered, democratic society. This does not mean that there are not cases where armed insurrection would be perfectly justified—Manila 1985, Tiananmen 1989. Indeed, the point of this act in those circumstances is to invite tyranny to open up to a democratic transition.

We can see here how the understanding of what we're doing right now (without which we couldn't be doing *this* action) makes the sense it does because of our grasp on the wider predicament: how we stand in relation to others and to power. There is also a space and time component to this predicament. We are concerned about our relationship to other nations and peoples, for example, with regard to external models of democratic life we are trying to imitate or of tyranny from which we are trying to distance ourselves. We are participating in the narrative of our becoming, whereby we recognize this capacity to demonstrate peacefully as an achievement of democracy, hard-won by our ancestors, or as a capability to which we aspire through this common action. This sense of standing in a global arena and in history is exemplified in the iconography of the demonstration itself, as in Tiananmen 1989, with its references to the French Revolution and its citation of the American case through the erection of a replica of the Statue of Liberty.

The background that makes sense of any given act is thus wide and deep. It doesn't include everything in our world, but the relevant sense-giving features can't be circumscribed. Indeed, the sense-giving draws on our whole world, that is, our sense of our whole predicament in time and space, among others and in history.

An important part of this wider background is what I called above a sense of moral order. By this I mean more than just a grasp of the norms underlying our social practice, which are part of the immediate understanding that makes this practice possible. There also must be a sense, as I stated above, of what makes

these norms realizable. This too is an essential part of the context of action. People don't demonstrate for the impossible, for the utopic—or if they do, then this becomes ipso facto a rather different action.²¹ Part of what we're saying as we march on Tiananmen is that a (somewhat more) democratic society is possible for us, that we could bring it off in spite of the skepticism of our gerontocratic rulers.

This confidence that we and other human beings can sustain a democratic order together, that it is within our range of possibilities, is based on images of moral order through which we understand human life and history. It ought to be clear from the above that our images of moral order, although they make sense of some of our actions, are by no means necessarily tilted toward the status quo. They may also infuse revolutionary practice, as at Manila and Beijing, just as they may underwrite the established order.

What I want to do, in the following pages, is sketch the changeover process in which the modern theory of moral order gradually infiltrates and transforms our social imaginary. In this process, what is originally just an idealization grows into a complex imaginary through being taken up and associated with social practices, in part traditional ones, which are often transformed by the contact. This is crucial to what I called above the extension of the understanding of moral order. It couldn't have become the dominant view in our culture without this penetration and transformation of our imaginary.

We see transitions of this kind happening, for instance, in the contemporary Western world's great founding revolutions, the American and the French. The transition was much smoother and less catastrophic in one case, because the idealization of popular sovereignty connected relatively unproblematically with an existing practice of popular election of assemblies. In the other case, the inability to "translate" the same principle into a stable and agreed set of practices was an immense source of conflict and uncertainty for more than a century. But in both these great events, there was some awareness of the historical primacy of theory—central to the modern idea of a "revolution"—whereby we set out to remake our political life according to agreed-upon principles. This "constructivism" has become a central feature of modern political culture.

21. This does not mean that utopias do not deal in their own kind of possibility. They may describe far-off lands or remote future societies that cannot be imitated today, which we may never be able to imitate. But the underlying idea is that these things are really possible, in the sense that they lie in the bend of human nature. This is what the narrator of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) thinks: the Utopians are living according to nature (Bronislaw Baczko, *Les imaginaires sociaux: Mémoires et espoirs collectifs* [Paris: Payot, 1984], 75). Plato thought this as well; he provided one of the models for More's book and for many other "utopian" writings.

What exactly is involved when a theory penetrates and transforms the social imaginary? For the most part, people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices. These practices are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory; this outlook is the context that gives sense to the practices. And hence the new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way it wasn't before. It begins to define the contours of their world and may eventually become the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention.

But this process isn't just one-sided, a theory making over a social imaginary. In making sense of the action, the theory is "glossed," as it were, given a particular shape in the context of these practices. Rather like Kant's notion of an abstract category becoming "schematized" when it is applied to reality in space and time, the theory is schematized in the dense sphere of common practice.²² Nor need the process end here. The new practice, with the implicit understanding it generates, can be the basis for modifications of theory, which in turn can inflect practice, and so on.

What I'm calling the "long march" is a process whereby new practices, or modifications of old ones, either developed through improvisation among certain groups and strata of the population (e.g., the public sphere among educated elites in the eighteenth century, trade unions among workers in the nineteenth century) or were launched by elites in such a way as to recruit a larger base (e.g., the Jacobin organization of the "sections" in Paris). Or alternatively, a set of practices in the course of their slow development and ramification gradually acquired a new meaning for people and hence helped to constitute a new social imaginary (e.g., the "economy"). The result in all these cases was a profound transformation of the social imaginary in Western societies and of the world in which we live.

4.

There are three important transitions that must figure in our account: the rise of (1) the economy, (2) the public sphere, and (3) the practices and outlooks of democratic self-rule. Each of these represents a penetration/transformation of the social imaginary by the Grotian-Lockean theory of moral order. I have already discussed the first transition and turn now to the other two.

The economic was perhaps the first dimension of "civil society" to achieve an identity independent from the polity. But it was soon followed by the public

22. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

sphere. The term *public sphere* refers to a common space in which the members of society meet through a variety of media: print and electronic as well as face-to-face encounters, wherein they discuss matters of common interest and thus are able to form a common mind about these. I say *a* common space because although the media are multiple, as are the exchanges that take place in them, they are deemed to be in principle intercommunicating. The discussion we're having on television now takes account of what was said in the newspaper this morning, which in turn reports on the radio debate yesterday, and so on. That's why we usually speak of the public sphere in the singular.

The public sphere is a central feature of modern society. So much so, that even where it is in fact suppressed or manipulated it has to be faked. Modern despotic societies have generally felt compelled to go through the motions. Editorials appear in the party newspapers, allegedly expressing the opinions of the writers, offered for the consideration of their fellow citizens; mass demonstrations are organized, purporting to give vent to the felt indignation of large numbers of people. All this is meant to suggest that a common mind is indeed being formed through exchange, even though the result is carefully controlled from the beginning.

In this discussion, I want to draw in particular upon two very interesting books, Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which deals with the development of public opinion in eighteenth-century western Europe, and Michael Warner's *The Letters of the Republic*, which describes the analogous phenomenon in the British American colonies.²³ A central theme of Habermas's book is the emergence of a new concept of public opinion. Dispersed publications and small group or local exchanges come to be construed as one big debate from which the "public opinion" of a whole society emerges. In other words, it is understood that widely separated people sharing the same view have been linked in a kind of space of discussion, wherein they have been able to exchange ideas together with others and reach this common end point.

What is this common space? It's actually a rather strange thing. The people involved have likely never met. But they are seen as linked in a common space of discussion through media—print media, in the eighteenth century. Books, pamphlets, newspapers circulated among the educated public, conveying theses,

23. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989); originally published as *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied, Germany: Luchterhand, 1962); and Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

analyses, arguments, counterarguments, referring to and refuting one another. These were widely read and often discussed in face-to-face gatherings, in drawing rooms, coffeehouses, salons, and in more (authoritatively) public places, like Parliament. Any perceived general view that resulted from all this counted as “public opinion,” in this new sense.

I have described the conditions under which something gets “counted as” public opinion. This reflects the fact that a public sphere can exist only if it is imagined as such. Unless all the dispersed discussions are seen by their participants as linked in one great exchange, there can be no sense of a resultant “public opinion.” I’m not suggesting that imagination is all-powerful. There are objective conditions, both internal (e.g., that the fragmentary local discussions inter-refer) and external (e.g., the need for printed materials, circulating from a plurality of independent sources, as a basis for common discussion). As is often said, the modern public sphere relied on “print capitalism” to get going.²⁴ But as Warner shows, printing itself, and even print capitalism, didn’t provide a sufficient condition. They had to be taken up in the right cultural context, where the essential common understandings could arise.²⁵ The public sphere was a mutation of the social imaginary, one crucial to the development of modern society. It was an important step on the long march.

We are now in a slightly better position to understand what a public sphere is and why it was new in the eighteenth century. It is a kind of common space, I have been saying, in which people who never meet understand themselves to be engaged in discussion and capable of reaching a common mind. Let me introduce some new terminology. We can speak of “common space” when people come together for a particular purpose, be it ritual, conversation, the enjoyment of a play, or the celebration of a major event. Their focus is common, as against merely convergent, because they are attending to the common object or purpose together, as opposed to each person just happening, on his or her own, to be concerned with the same thing. This kind of common space, in which people are assembled for some purpose—be it on an intimate level for conversation or on a larger, more “public” scale for a deliberative assembly or the enjoyment of a football match or an opera—is intuitively understandable. I want to call common space arising from assembly in some locale “topical common space.”

But the public sphere, as we have been defining it, is something different. It transcends such topical spaces. We might say that it knits a plurality of spaces

24. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

25. Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, chap. 1.

into one larger space of nonassembly. The same public discussion is deemed to pass through our debate today, and someone else's earnest conversation tomorrow, and the newspaper interview Thursday, and so on. I want to call this larger kind of nonlocal common space "metatopical." The public sphere that emerges in the eighteenth century is a metatopical common space.

Metatopicality is not new. The Church, the state were already existing metatopical spaces. But there are three novel features of the public sphere that mark it as a step in the long march, a mutation in the social imaginary, inspired by the modern idea of order.

One of these features is mentioned above: the identity independent of the polity. The second is its force as a benchmark of legitimacy. We can see the novelty in these two respects if we compare a modern society's public sphere with an ancient republic or polis. In the latter, we can imagine that debate on public affairs may be carried on in a host of settings: among friends at a symposium, between those who meet in the agora, and then of course in the *ekklesia* (general assembly) where the thing is finally decided. The debate swirls around and ultimately reaches its conclusion in the competent decision-making body. The discussions outside this body prepare for the action ultimately taken by the same people within it. The "unofficial" discussions are not set apart, given a status of their own, nor seen as constituting a kind of metatopical space.

But that is what happens with the modern public sphere. It is a space of discussion that is self-consciously seen as being outside power. It is supposed to be listened to by power, but it is not itself an exercise of power. Its extrapolitical status is crucial; it links the public sphere with other facets of modern society that also are seen as essentially extrapolitical. The extrapolitical status is not just defined negatively, as a lack of power. It is also seen positively: because public opinion is not an exercise of power, it can be ideally rational and disengaged from partisan spirit.

In other words, with the modern public sphere comes the idea that political power must be supervised and checked by something external. What was new, of course, was not that there was an outside check but rather the nature of it. It is not defined as the will of God or the law of nature (although it could be thought to articulate these), but as a kind of discourse emanating from reason, not from power or traditional authority. As Habermas puts it, power was to be tamed by reason. The notion was that *veritas non auctoritas facit legem*.²⁶

26. Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 82.

This brings us to the third novel feature. It is obvious that an extrapolitical, even international society, which could challenge the state, was not an unknown phenomenon in European history. The public sphere was preceded by the Stoic cosmopolis and, more immediately, by the Christian church. Europeans were used to living in a dual society, one organized by two mutually irreducible principles. So the third facet of the newness of the public sphere has to be defined as its radical secularity.

Here I am recurring to a very particular use of this term, one close to its original meaning as an expression for a certain kind of time. It is obviously intimately related to the one common meaning of secularity, which focuses on the removal of God or religion or the spiritual from public space. What I am talking about here is not exactly that, but something that has contributed to it, namely, a shift in our understanding of what society is grounded on. In spite of all the risks of confusion, there is a reason to use the term *secular* because it marks in its very etymology what is at stake here, which has something to do with the way human society inhabits time.²⁷

The notion of secularity I'm using here is radical, because it stands in contrast not only with a divine foundation for society, but also with any idea of society as constituted in something that transcends contemporary common action. For instance, some hierarchical societies conceive themselves as embodying some part of the chain of being. Behind the empirical fillers of the slots of kingship, aristocracy, and so on, lie the ideas, or the persisting metaphysical realities, that these people are momentarily embodying. The king has two bodies, only one being the particular, perishable one, which is now being fed and clothed, and will later be buried.²⁸ Within this outlook, what constitutes a society as such is the metaphysical order it embodies.²⁹ People act within a framework that exists prior to and independent of their actions.

But secularity contrasts not only with divinely established churches, or great chains. It is also different from an understanding of our society as constituted by a law that has been ours from time immemorial. This type of understanding places our action within a framework, one that binds us together and makes us a

27. I have developed this change in time consciousness in "Die Modernität und die säkulare Zeit," in *Am Ende des Millenniums: Zeit und Modernitäten*, ed. Krzysztof Michalski (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2000).

28. See Ernest Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957).

29. For an extra-European example of this kind of thing, see Clifford Geertz's *Negara* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980) and his discussion of the prequest Balinese state.

society, and which transcends our common action. The public sphere, however, is an association that is constituted by nothing outside of the common action we carry out within it: coming to a common mind, where possible, through the exchange of ideas. It exists as an association simply through our acting together in this way. This common action is not made possible by a framework that needs to be established in some action-transcendent dimension: either by an act of God or in a great chain or by a law that comes down to us time out of mind. It is an agency grounded purely in its own common actions. This is what makes it radically secular. And this, I want to claim, gets us to the heart of what is new and unprecedented in it.



I will now try to draw my comments together and state what the public sphere *was* and continues to be. It was a new metatopical space, in which members of society could exchange ideas and come to a common mind. As such it constituted a metatopical agency but one that was understood to exist independent of the political constitution of society and completely in profane time. An extrapolitical, secular, metatopical space—this is what the public sphere was and is. And the importance of understanding this lies partly in the fact that it was not an isolated entity, that it was part of a development that transformed our whole understanding of time and society, so that we have trouble recalling what it was like before.

5.

There are two other such extrapolitical, secular spaces that have played a crucial role in the development of society: (1) society considered as extrapolitically organized in a (market) economy, which I mentioned above; and (2) society as a “people,” that is, as a metatopical agency that is thought to preexist and found the politically organized society. We have to see these three as linked in their development and also as interwoven with other kinds of social spaces that were also emerging at this time.

The citizen state is the third in the great connected chain of mutations in the social imaginary that have helped constitute modern society. It too starts off as a theory and then gradually infiltrates and transmutes social imaginaries. We can see how older ideas of legitimacy are colonized, as it were, with the new understandings of order and then transformed—without a clear break, in some cases.

The United States is a case in point. The reigning notions of legitimacy in Britain and America, the ones that fired the English civil war, for instance, as

well as the beginnings of the colonies' rebellion, were basically backward-looking. They pivoted on the idea of an "ancient constitution," an order based on law from time immemorial, in which Parliament had its rightful place beside the king. This was typical of one of the most widespread premodern understandings of order, which referred back to a "time of origins"—a time separate from ordinary time.³⁰

This older idea emerges from the American Revolution transformed into a full-fledged foundation in popular sovereignty, whereby the U.S. Constitution is put in the mouth of "We the people." This was preceded by an appeal to the idealized order of natural law in the invocation of "truths held self-evident" in the Declaration of Independence. What was understood as the traditional law privileged elected assemblies and their consent to taxation; this, in turn, facilitated the transition to popular sovereignty. All that was needed was to shift the balance in these institutions so as to make elections the only source of legitimate power.

But what makes this change a possibility is a transformed social imaginary, in which the idea of foundation is taken out of the mythical early time and seen as something that people can do today. In other words, it becomes something that can be brought about by collective action in contemporary, purely secular time. This happened sometime in the eighteenth century, but really more toward its end than its beginning. Elites propounded *theories* of founding action beforehand, but these hadn't adequately sunk into the general social imaginary for them to be acted on. So that 1688, radical departure as it may seem to us in retrospect, was presented as an act of continuity, of return to a preexistent legality. (We are fooled by a change in semantics. The Glorious Revolution had the earlier sense of a return to the original position, not the modern sense of an innovative turnover. Of course, its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, that is, its impact on later historical events, helped to alter the meaning.)

This fit between theory and social imaginary is crucial to the outcome. Popular sovereignty could be invoked in the American case, because it had a generally agreed-upon institutional meaning. All colonists agreed that the way to found a new constitution was through some kind of assembly, perhaps slightly larger than the normal one, such as in Massachusetts in 1779. The force of the old representative institutions helped to "interpret" the new concept in practical terms.

Quite different was the case in the French Revolution, with fateful effects. The impossibility remarked by all historians of "bringing the Revolution to an

30. "Time of origins" is Mircea Eliade's phrase; see his book, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959).

end”³¹ came partly from the fact that any particular expression of popular sovereignty could be challenged by some other, with substantial support. Part of the terrifying instability of the first years of the Revolution stemmed from this negative fact, that the shift from the legitimacy of dynastic rule to that of the nation had no commonly accepted meaning in a broadly based social imaginary.

This is to be understood not as the global “explanation” of this instability, but as telling us something about the way in which the different factors we cite to explain it worked together to produce the result we know. Of course, the fact that substantial parts of the king’s entourage, the army, and the nobility did not accept the new principles created a tremendous obstacle to stabilization. And even those who were for the new legitimacy were divided among themselves. But what made these latter divisions so deadly was the absence of any agreed-upon understanding of the institutional meaning of the sovereignty of the nation.

Edmund Burke’s advice to the revolutionaries was to stick to their traditional constitution and amend it piecemeal. But this was already beyond their powers. It was not just that the representative institutions of this constitution, the Estates General, had been in abeyance for 175 years. They were also profoundly out of sync with the aspiration to equal citizenship that had developed among the educated classes, the bourgeoisie, and a good part of the aristocracy, which found expression in a number of ways: negatively through the attack on aristocratic privilege and positively in the enthusiasm for republican Rome and its ideals.³² That is why virtually the first demand of the Third Estate in 1789 was to abolish the separate chambers and bring all the delegates together in a single National Assembly.

Even more gravely, outside of these educated elites, there was very little sense of what a representative constitution might mean. True, masses of people responded to the calling of the Estates General with their *cahiers de doléance* (lists of grievances), but this whole procedure supposed the continuance of royal sovereignty; it wasn’t at all suited to serve as a channel for the popular will.

What the moderates hoped for was something along the lines of Burke’s prescription: an evolution of the traditional constitution to fashion the kind of representative institutions that would be understood by all as the expression of the nation’s will, through the votes of the citizens. This is what the House of Commons had become in the eighteenth century, even though the “people” here con-

31. François Furet and Denis Richet, *La Révolution française* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 1999).

32. See Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989), chap. 4.

stituted a small elite, deemed to speak for the whole through various kinds of virtual representation. This representation contributed to the sense of self-rule that was part of the broader society's social imaginary. Thus we find that in England, demands for broader popular participation took the form of proposals to extend the franchise. The people wanted entry into the established representative structure, as, most notably, in the Chartist agitation of the 1830s and 1840s. The American case discussed above was a stage ahead on this same evolution; their representative assemblies were generally elected on the basis of manhood suffrage.

These forms of self-rule through elected assembly were part of the generally available repertory in the Anglo-Saxon societies. The popular classes in France, however, had developed their own forms of popular protest, which were structured by a quite different logic. When things became intolerable, French peasants and city dwellers had their own way of making their needs known: the peasant or urban uprising. For example, when the price of wheat soared and local merchants were suspected of hoarding grain to make a large profit, riots ensued, targeting the municipal authorities and/or the offending merchants. Often these offenders were killed, casualties of a partly ritualized violence that the modern sensibility finds gruesome (e.g., once decapitated, their heads were carried around on pikes and displayed). The royal government would react, send in soldiers, restore order, and effect some exemplary punishments (more killing, with the ritual elements accompanying public executions under the *ancien régime*).³³ But they would also be sure to take measures to lower the price of grain, imposing ceilings and importing stocks from elsewhere.

From one point of view, the whole bloody process appears as an exchange between the base and the summit where power resides, the enacting of a *cahier de doléance* in unmistakable terms. But the background understanding that enframes the whole exchange is that power remains at the summit; it's the very opposite of the understanding defining popular sovereignty. Popular classes that function in this way have to transform their repertory before they can act as a sovereign people.

A good part of what was involved in "bringing the Revolution to an end" was this transformation of the popular repertory, the development of a new social imaginary that would confer on regular, ordered elections the meaning of expres-

33. Just how elaborate and horrifying (to us) these could be one can glean from the description of the execution of Damiens, who made an attempt on the life of Louis XV in 1757, in the riveting opening pages of Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

sions of popular will. In the meantime, as always, there was a struggle to reinterpret old practices in a new way.

Take the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789. This was in many ways an old-style popular insurrection. It had a particular, limited goal: getting hold of the arms that were supposedly stored in the Bastille in order to defend Paris against the threat of the Swiss mercenaries. And it ended in a very traditional ritual of violence: the execution of the governor and the displaying of his head on a pike. But just as the revolt of the colonies in the name of their traditional, established rights was later reinterpreted as the innovative act of a sovereign people, so here the taking of the Bastille was seen as an assertion of popular power. The building's importance was no longer the particular, contingent fact that it contained arms (actually it did not, but that is what was believed), but its essential, symbolic nature as a prison in which people were arbitrarily confined by royal fiat.

This creative misremembering has played a big part in the transformation of the social imaginary. It was ritually referred to in the *fête de la fédération* exactly a year later, through which Lafayette hoped to stabilize the revolution in the more moderate form of a constitutional monarchy. And it has become, of course, *the* symbolic date of the turnover to popular rule, the annual national feast of the French republic. But in the nature of things this kind of transformation couldn't be effected right away, in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution. Moreover, any chance of doing this was undermined by the fact that the leading elites couldn't agree on the representative forms that they wanted to have accepted as the normal channels of the popular will.

For the great battle among the different revolutionary factions turned on this question: What was the correct institutional expression for the sovereignty of the nation? This issue defined the terms of the struggle among these groups. Each had its formula to offer as the proper way of realizing this principle: whether through a republic or constitutional monarchy, through indirect representation or some more immediate relation of people and deputy, through the representation of different interests, or the undivided expression of a general will. The undecidable issue among these different institutions and procedures had in the end to be determined at the boundary of all of them, through *coups de force*. Thus the members of the Convention elected by the "people" were eventually purged in 1793 under threat of the activists from the Paris sections, and that in the name of the "people." The immediate consequences are too horrible and too well known to be repeated.

The terms of this struggle, its peculiarly intense ideological nature, the immense importance placed on theoretical justifications and models of right government,

during those days when the urgent practical dangers of foreign invasion and internal counterrevolutionary insurrection seemed to demand their place at the top of the agenda; these are to be understood in this context. The discourse wasn't simply a cover for the hard reality of group interest and military defense (though this diagnosis does describe conditions under the Directory [1795–99]). In fact, all this talk was for real, its goal being to establish that one's own group was carrying out the only legitimate realization of the sovereignty of the people. And this meant that however dotty the content of the discourse, generally it was meant in deadly earnest—even in the case of the Jacobins, where the criteria of genuine representation of the people turned crucially on the virtue of the leaders, standing foursquare for the whole against the self-interested, divisive “factions.” For the Jacobins, the expression “deadly earnest” is especially appropriate. As Furet has argued, the murderous craziness of the revolutionary crisis cannot be considered a kind of rhetorical froth thrown up by the real battles for national survival, or between groups. We have to allow for its centrality.³⁴

The problem of “ending the Revolution” continued to haunt French society into the Restoration and well into the nineteenth century.³⁵ The return to some stability in the aftermath of the Revolution could come only through some generally accepted forms of representative government. And this meant solving the double problem that the whole revolutionary period had left unresolved: coming to an agreement among political elites on representative institutions, which could at the same time become part of the popular social imaginary.

Once again, during the Restoration, the opposition of the royalist ultras made things exceedingly difficult. And the growing social divisions that came with the growth of the working class made it all the more difficult to bridge the gap between elite constitutionalism and popular repertory. On the contrary, the Revolution remained alive for a number of radicals not just as the gateway to a proper institutional order, but as itself the paradigm moment of popular sovereignty. Something like a revolutionary scenario, what Robert Tombs calls “the Revolutionary passion play,” haunted the radical imagination and remained in the popular memory, waiting to be reenacted in order to realize finally the promise of 1789.³⁶ In these circumstances, the specter of renewed revolution could never be laid to rest, however often the claim was made to have “ended the Revolution.”

But as François Guizot, the Doctrinaires, Adolphe Thiers, and later Léon

34. François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

35. See Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), especially 16–17 and 285.

36. Robert Tombs, *France: 1814–1914* (London: Longman, 1996), 20–26.

Gambetta saw, the only solution would be the evolution of forms that would come to be generally recognized as the obviously appropriate realization of the new principle of legitimacy. Guizot and the Doctrinaires understood that this required the growth of a new, widely shared social imaginary, but their own elite representative institutions, with their narrow franchise, could never crystallize this around themselves, as gradually became clear after 1830.³⁷ Over time, republican France found such forms, but only after it had gone over to manhood suffrage. Gambetta saw that the only way the people could develop a new social imaginary around ordered representative institutions was by participating in their election.³⁸

The forms that “took” in France turned out to be interestingly different from the Anglo-American mode. Pierre Rosanvallon has traced the peculiar path by which universal suffrage was achieved in France, and he brings to light the different shape of the social imaginary in this republican tradition.³⁹

6.

After the economy and the public sphere, the last of the three great mutations involves “inventing the people” as a new collective agency.⁴⁰ In the forms that have emerged from these mutations, we can recognize the lineaments of our understanding of moral order in contemporary liberal democracies. The way we imagine our social life is articulated in these forms. The society in which we live is not just the politically structured order; we also belong to *civil society*. We are linked in an economy, can seek access to a public sphere, and move in a world of independent associations.

37. Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot*, 80, and chap. 9.

38. See Gambetta’s speech of 9 October 1877, quoted in Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot*, 364–65:

Je parle pour ceux qui, parmi les conservateurs, ont quelque souci de la stabilité quelque souci de la légalité, quelque souci de la modération pratiquée avec persévérance dans la vie publique. Je leur dis, à ceux-là: comment ne voyez-vous pas qu’avec le suffrage universel, si on le laisse librement fonctionner, si on respecte, quand il s’est prononcé, son indépendance et l’autorité de ses décisions, comment ne voyez-vous pas, dis-je, que vous avez là un moyen de terminer pacifiquement tous les conflits, de dénouer toutes les crises, et que, si le suffrage universel fonctionne dans la plénitude de la souveraineté, il n’y a plus de révolution possible, parce qu’il n’y a plus de révolution à tenter, plus de coup d’État à redouter quand la France a parlé.

39. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen: Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

40. Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988).

Moreover, action in the political sphere has to take account of the integrity of the other forms and the goals people seek in them. It is true that the idea of politics as purely instrumental to, say, economic prosperity is hotly contested in the Western world (and rightly so, I believe). In fact, the emergence of popular sovereignty has given politics a new importance, which partly expressed itself in the retrieval of forms and ideals from the ancient republics and poleis, in which political activity stood at the apex of the citizen's life. But even so, the integrity of the other spheres cannot be gainsaid. The drive to override them, to control all other aspects of life in the name of some radiant future, has become familiar to us as the totalitarian temptation, visible early on at the height of the Jacobin terror and latterly in Soviet Communism and its offshoots. Not only do these attempts run counter to certain fundamental features of our understanding of moral order—most notably the demand for individual freedom and moral autonomy—but they themselves have generally been undertaken in the hope (vain, as it turns out) that this hypercontrol would bring forth a world of nonconstraint. For Marxism, the ultimate end was the withering away of the state. Here, indeed, is an eloquent testimony to the profound anchoring of the prepolitical in a modern understanding as limit and goal of politics.⁴¹

This sense of the modern age as one that gives a crucial place to the nonpolitical was articulated early on by Benjamin Constant in his famous lecture on ancient and modern liberty.⁴² The error of Jacobinism (and of Rousseau), according to Constant, was to think that the only freedom which matters is that of political participation, prized by the ancients. But we have become people for whom economic prosperity and the satisfactions of private life also have a crucial importance. We cannot just apply the ancient models to our political life.

To the three forms of social existence we have already identified in our modern imaginary—economy, public sphere, and a polity ruled by the people—we should add a fourth, which has been articulated in bills and charters of rights. Here is a crucial feature of the original Grotian-Lockean theory that has become embedded in our understanding of normative order. It has come to structure our

41. In the case of the other great totalitarian temptation of our century, fascism, we do in fact have a frontal assault on our understanding of moral order. This is one facet of the reaction against this order, which I want to characterize more fully in another work. It is important to see that this order has been and will continue to be contested. But it is hard to imagine its being replaced. We were lucky in that fascism was eliminated by military defeat in the first half of the century. But even if it had not suffered this fate, I doubt that fascist regimes could have indefinitely resisted the demands for greater freedom that are so anchored in Western culture.

42. Benjamin Constant, "De la liberté des anciens, comparée à celle des modernes," in *Écrits politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

social imaginary in somewhat the same way and by the same process as has popular sovereignty. That is, earlier practices were given a new sense, and thus came to be structured differently.

Just as the practices of getting consent from elected assemblies were transformed during the American Revolution into a new definition of political legitimacy, so too did the practices embodying the primacy of law begin to change their sense at the same time and through the same political changes. Instead of enshrining merely the rights of Englishmen, they began to be seen as reflections of the natural right of which the great seventeenth-century theorists had spoken. These were invoked in the Declaration of Independence. The primacy of rights is given a further push by the first ten amendments to the Constitution.

This whole development reaches its culmination in our time, in the period after the Second World War, in which the notion of rights that are prior to and untouchable by political structures becomes widespread—although they are now called “human” rather than “natural” rights. This consciousness is given expression in the entrenchment of charters of rights, by which ordinary legislation can be set aside when it violates these fundamental norms.

These declarations of rights can be seen as the clearest expression of our modern idea of a moral order underlying the political—the ideal of order as mutual benefit—which the political has to respect.

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