

Reason or Art?

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For decades now, Charles Taylor has been trying to convince epistemologists, proceduralists, cognitivists, and naturalist social scientists to take hermeneutics seriously. For a time, he mainly did this with arguments both epistemological and scientific. But when it became clear that these were not working, he turned to articulating the moral ideals underlying the approaches in question, ideals about which their advocates, because of their methodologies, have been mute. By giving an account of their identity or sense of self, Taylor believes, he can show them that hermeneutics knows them better than they know themselves.

Modern Social Imaginaries is another work in this vein. Though of modest size, the book manages to display its author's immense intellectual talents, philosophical, sociological and historical, buttressing his admirers in our belief that Taylor is one of the great thinkers of our time. The book's central aim is to help us "come to a clearer definition of the self-understandings that have been constitutive of [Western modernity]" (p. 1). It certainly does this. But as a means of convincing those whom Taylor wishes to convince, I suspect that it will, like his other attempts, fail. The reason is simple: they are just not listening.

Indeed, if I may make an admittedly unorthodox suggestion, they are not listening because they cannot, and they cannot because their creativity depends upon it. For reason as they practice it is not, in fact, a kind of reason; rather, it is a form of art. Otherwise put: they are not so much thinkers, as artists.

I would say the same of the originators of the vision whose development Taylor traces in this book. "My basic hypothesis," he writes, "is that central to Western modernity is a new conception of the moral order of society. This was at first just an idea in the minds of some influential thinkers, but it later came to shape the social imaginary of large strata and then eventually whole societies"

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(p. 2). Rather than “idea,” I would speak of “inspiration,” since the theory in question strikes me as more artistic than rational, more creative than interpretive. To Taylor, it received its clearest formulation with the 17th-century natural law doctrines that were largely “a response to the domestic and international disorder wrought by the wars of religion” (p. 3). But to say of Grotius and Locke that “their aim was to find a stable basis of legitimacy beyond confessional differences” (p. 33) seems to me to be only partially right. For one thing, it does not take sufficient account of the fact that, from Hobbes to Rawls, the idea of a social contract – one central to this vision – has been a hypothetical, and so a product of the imagination.

Consider Taylor’s description of Grotius’ theory: “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” (p. 3). Now Taylor himself has famously criticized the atomist ontology underlying all this. But how, then, given that Grotius (who, by the way, was also a poet) was not only mistaken scientifically and epistemologically but also defended a vision incompatible with many moderns’ most cherished goods (community, ecology, etc.), do we account for its powerful attraction? My answer is that we need to conceive of his project differently, as artistic rather than rational, and so go beyond even Horkheimer and Adorno’s talk of how the Enlightenment contains *traces* of myth.

Taylor’s account seems to me to beg the question of how the original theory gradually infiltrated and transformed the social imaginary, becoming the dominant view. Taylor is very good, brilliant actually, on how the failures associated with the Russian and French revolutions may be read as revealing examples of the conditions necessary for a revolutionary transition based on a novel theory to take hold within people’s social imaginary. But when it comes to explaining the impact of the great modern founding revolutions, the French as well as the American, it all sounds a little too rational to me:

In both these great events, there was some awareness of the historical primacy of theory, which is central to the modern idea of a revolution, whereby we set out to remake our political life according to agreed principles. This constructivism has become a central feature of modern political culture...But this process isn’t just one-sided, a theory making over a social imaginary. In coming to make sense of the action the theory is glossed, as it were, given a particular shape as the context of

these practices (pp. 29-30).

Because what if there was more going on than merely the “coming to make sense of” a theory in practice?

What I’m suggesting, then, is that the title of Taylor’s book is more appropriate than its author realises. Taylor explains that the idea of an “imaginary” is meant to deflect us from purely “theoretical” accounts; it’s supposed to be wider, looser, a means of including our hermeneutical, and so partly prereflective, sense of things. A social imaginary is thus much more diffuse than any original theoretical vision. It is an “understanding” (pp. 19, 23) of the moral order, one meant to embody “the ways 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 underlies these expectations” (p. 23).

But of course there is another, fictional sense of “imaginary,” one to which Taylor himself alludes when he points out that a social imaginary can be “carried in images, stories, and legends” (p. 23). The implication is that this should be distinguished from the original theory, which is non-fictional. Yet that is where I think Taylor goes astray. Because I don’t recall ever signing a social contract. Do you?

Taylor repeats this error in his account of the imaginary itself. As in many of his previous writings, he presents us with what could be described as a moral topography of modern social practices. Overall, these may be distinguished in terms of three basic forms of social understanding. The first is the modern economy, the crucial idea being that our purposes interlock or mesh systematically by virtue of “invisible hand” practices. This systematicity is associated with the economy’s independence, hence with the rise of the modern distinction between it and the state. Taylor thus writes of our need to adopt a “bi-focal” perspective, as well as to remember, with Weber, the spiritual impetus for all this. I cannot help but wonder, however, if the latter shouldn’t mean taking account of its artistic qualities as well. I shall explain why in a moment.

The bi-focal perspective receives support from the second modern social understanding, that of the “public sphere” whose difference from the state is shown to be associated with the rise of private spaces, which are the result of demands for privacy as well as of individualistic forms of participation within larger groups, the kind that produces “horizontal,” direct-access connections between people. As Taylor puts it, the public sphere is a “meta-topical” common space, since all

of its topical parts are understood to be communicating and so contributing to the development of public opinion. The latter has, of course, become a benchmark of legitimacy in modern politics, thanks to the importance given to the notion of government by consent.

All these developments are said to be radically secular, by which Taylor means wholly restricted to an immanent, hence secular, form of time. Note that, on this point, Taylor does not seem to be merely describing the modern self-understanding; he appears to endorse it as well. But what of the birth of, say, national communities, not to mention all of the artworks created within them? Can the formation of these narratives by artists be said to take place wholly within a purely secular time? Taylor seems to think so. Yet what of all the talk about artists being “inspired” to create – does it not suggest that there is a difference between creation and mere interpretation? The latter is always “about” something in the world, since that is what it aims to “make sense” of, and so it is indeed wholly immanent. But the former?

Now if creation and interpretation must indeed be distinguished, then perhaps we should be speaking not so much, with Taylor, of modernity’s wholesale rejection of the aristocratic ethic of honour and heroism, a rejection that he associates with the rise of the public sphere, as of its transformation into a more creative mode. That is, instead of its suppression, perhaps the hunt for glory has been transposed such that, rather than taking the form of self-interpreting adversaries struggling to defeat each other on a battlefield of some kind or other, it’s carried out by artists hoping to be inspired so that they can create great works of art. If so, ought this to be grasped in purely secular terms? Consider: when Taylor refers to the extraordinary moments of crowd fusion at rock concerts, he cites, but seems sceptical about, those who emphasize their religious dimensions (p. 169). But what if we go along with them? This would give us a reason to extrapolate a suggestion, namely, that life in the public sphere could be shot through with moments of not-wholly-immanent creativity.

The third social understanding consists of the practices and outlooks of modern democratic self-rule. “Popular sovereignty,” Taylor writes, also “starts off as a theory, and then gradually infiltrates and transmutes social imaginaries” (p. 109). Following Benedict Anderson, he sees this as a matter of “inventing the people,” making for “a new collective agency” (p. 143). This is then shown to be associated with a new understanding of time, one that allows us to conceive of “society as the whole consisting of the simultaneous happening of all the myriad events that mark the lives of its members at that moment” (p. 157). The claim, again, is that this is the result

of a thoroughly secular process, since social temporalities that can be described as vertical rather than horizontal are said to have disappeared in the modern age.

Yet while Taylor evidently believes that modernity has no place for stories of action-transcendent groundings of society in higher time, this does not mean that he wishes to rule out a role for religion in public life altogether. Near the end of the book, he refers to the religiosity of many American citizens and describes it as existing side by side with, indeed within the context of, entirely secular political moments. So while a basically secular modern politics is recommended to us as “probably a good idea” (p. 188), Taylor still appears to think that it makes sense to recognize how, for some, there is indeed a place for God in politics. That, at least, is how they conceive of their contributions to the political identity that they share with their fellow citizens. But if we refer to this as but a matter of their political self-interpretations, this would once again restrict us to the interpretive as distinct from the creative and so allow for only those religious affirmations that take place wholly within secular time. I am just not so sure that we moderns – whether we are aware of it or not – are so limited.