Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory/Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale. Vol. IX, No. 3 (Fall/automne) 1985.

MODERNITY AND THE QUEST FOR POLITICAL COMMUNITY

JAMES WISER

Although the idea that it is possible "to be modern" already appeared in the writings of the Roman historian Cassiodorus, it is common to cite the 18th century as the beginning of the modern age.[1] For many the spirit of modernity achieved its clearest expression in the goals and aspirations of the French Enlightenment. There the scientific work of Locke and Newton was interpreted as providing the guidelines for an historical project. Freed from the superstitions and ignorance of an earlier religious age, modern man was to follow the dictates of autonomous reason and create, thereby, the conditions for the good life on earth. The introduction of such a project within an essentially Christian civilization was bound to produce a series of severe personal and social dislocations. Given this, a reaction was all but inevitable and, in time, such conservative thinkers as de Maistre, Bonald, Novalis, Mueller, and Fichte began to question that assumption of historical perfectability which was implicit with the modernist project itself. In particular modernity's critics were concerned about the future of the political community. The Enlightenment's emphasis upon individual self-interest, its sensualist psychology, and its commitment to progress and historical change appeared to undermine the sense of cultural and historical continuity which was believed to be a necessary prerequisite for minimal political order. Indeed a comparison of the artificial and unnatural quality of those relationships which were formed by modern men with the more natural and somewhat organic bonds characteristic of a more traditional or perfected community is a theme which can be found in the writings of such diverse critics of the Enlightenment as Burke, Rousseau, and Marx. Even today commentators continue to call attention to the destructive impact of modernization upon the more traditional forms of community life. For example, Peter Berger writes:

> Modernization has entailed a progressive separation of the individual from collective entities, and as a result has brought about a historically unprecedented counterposition of individual and society . . . (This is caused by) the weakening of the all-embracing, all-containing communities that used to sustain the individual in premodern societies.[2]

Similarly, in his *Law and Modern Society*, Roberto Unger distinguishes among three types of modern societies: the post-liberal, the traditionalistic, and the revolutionary-socialist. Each, however, faces a common problem of balancing the

modern concern for freedom and progress with the perennial need for a legitimate and cohesive social order:

> But postliberal, traditionalistic, and revolutionary socialist society are all obsessed, in different ways, with the reconciliation of freedom and community. This alliance is part of a broader responsibility: the sense of a latent or natural order in social life must be harmonized with the capacity to let the will remake social arrangements. To achieve this reconciliation, and thereby to work toward the ideal of a universal community, is the greatest task of modern societies.[3]

The challenge of creating and preserving a sense of community is not one which is unique to the modern age. Indeed as Glenn Tinder has argued, there are certain unavoidable and necessary obstacles to the creation of a full community.[4] First, as a mortal creature living in time and bound by space, man's very nature limits his capacity to enter into a full and enduring communal existence. As distinct, limited, and separate individuals, our very bodies represent a denial of community identity. Secondly, as necessarily self-concerned and all too often selfish creatures, we also appear to lack the necessary moral capacity for community life. The tension that exists between the individual's personal good and the society's more general common good sets an obvious moral limit to any community's claim upon the loyalty of its members. Finally, as Artistotle first suggested, friendships which are formed on any basis other than that of simple goodness are necessarily unenduring. Given the fact of human imperfection, therefore, no community can be guaranteed the substantial foundation that its perfection would seem to require. Thus Tinder concludes:

> Community is not only alluring, however, it is also unattainable. Man is not capable of community — not, at least, in any full and stable form. No doubt relationships of communal quality can be realized occasionally and in limits by a family, a town, a university, or even a nation. But no historical institution can be purely and simply a community.[5]

One can grant Tinder's argument and yet at the same time recognize that success in realizing a real community is essentially a matter of degree. Assuming that community is a good, the question is not whether it is fully attainable or not, but rather the degree to which specific historical societies are capable of participating in that excellence which is fully represented by the concept of community in its perfected form. Thus, allowing Tinder's claim that a true community can never be fully realized in any age, it is nonetheless the case that the quest for community appears to be a particularly difficult one for modern man. Not only have communities proven to be fragile entities in the face of powerful historical and economic changes but just as importantly they are increasingly being experienced as such by

their members. Man's institutional environment is losing the appearance of objectivity and what was once considered to be a natural, and therefore legitimate, order is increasingly being perceived as arbitrary and situational.[6]

In part, one can explain the growing fragility of contemporary institutions by reference to the growth of modern science and technology. The rapidity of technological innovation, the increased division of labor and its concomitant need for centralized planning and administration, the social and cultural pluralism of the newer urban centers, the forms of instrumental rationality imposed by the commitment to technological efficiency, the development of the mass media, and the pluralization of man's social life-worlds have all had a somewhat corrosive effect on traditional communal bonds. However such factors provide only a partial explanation for the increasingly difficult task of creating and preserving a sense of community in the modern age. In seeking a more complete understanding, one must turn to the tradition of political philosophy.

To a certain degree, modern political thought has set for itself the task of liberating the individual personality. In the process of doing so, however, it has been forced to reconsider its understanding of both nature and history. This, in turn, has called into question the appropriateness of those very categories by which pre-modern societies could establish their legitimacy and thus preserve their objectivity. The following discussion is meant to serve as a summary of this development.

Nature

An examination of the Greek use of the concept of nature may help to clarify this point. It appears that all the schools of Greek natural philosophy, be they evolutionary or creational, materialistic or formal, began with the common assumption that the objective of science was to uncover the permanent, and thus knowable, substance of things. Seeking the internal nature of physical reality, Greek natural science was motivated primarily by the desire for theoretical wisdom. Although this was obviously true for both Plato and Aristotle, it was equally the case for such atomists as Epicurus and Lucretius.[7] Accordingly, nature was seen as an ordered whole having both accidental and essential attributes. Knowledge of these attributes, in turn, was understood as being a fundamental constituent of that intellectual fulfillment which was characteristic of true human happiness. For the Greeks, then, nature was seen as a source of both knowledge and meaning and, as such, it was understood to be providing a sense of direction and purpose to human life. Man was intended by his nature to know and thus by gaining a knowledge of nature in general, he fulfilled the potential of his own being.

The belief that nature was a source of both meaning and direction had obvious political implications. As a consequence a major theme within Greek political speculation was concerned with the proper relationship between nature and custom. Generally the Greeks believed that nature should serve as a model for the political order. Thus, for example, such different thinkers as Plato, Callicles, Demosthenes, Aristotle, Hippias, and Antiphon appealed to nature as the standard by which to judge the political practices of their time. Obviously they disagreed as

to what constituted a correct interpretation of nature but at the same time they understood it as something to which man could turn for instruction. Although it is true that the teachings of such Greeks as Protagoras, Critias, and Isocrates prove that such an appeal to nature was not an acceptable method for everyone, it is nonetheless true that the Greek understanding of nature would allow for such an appeal to be made. Thus one could maintain that specific sets of laws or practices were legitimate because they were natural, and that, as natural, they were neither arbitrary nor meaningless. This, indeed, is the assumption behind traditional natural law theory.

The modern understanding of nature, on the other hand, is one which denies the existence of both formal and final causation. Thus neither the mechanistic cosmologies of early modern science, which attempted to explain natural phenomena in terms of material and efficient causation, nor today's probabilistic cosmologies, which have substituted the law of chance for the principle of cause and effect, permit a discussion of purpose. As understood today, nature intends nothing; it has no preferred outcomes and consequently it is indifferent to a distinction among values. Intending nothing, it permits all and, as such, denies the existence of a natural hierarchy among goods. Lacking a design and devoid of a purpose, there can be no "ought" in nature. As a consequence the meaning of any activity can only be found in the intentions which men bring to its performance. Culture, in turn, becomes nothing but the sum total of those "projects" which men choose to undertake. Yet inasmuch as there can be no reasons in nature for such choices, the projects themselves must necessarily appear to be arbitrary. Referring to this feature of the "one-leveled universe" described by modern science Marjorie Grene writes:

> First, be it noted, it is a universe constructed on the foundation of the contrast between the *natural* and the *artificial*. There can be no "higher" and "lower" in nature. Yet in human life, in what we call culture, in language, custom, institutions, we find nature transformed by man . . . To many these products of human activity, laws, theories, works of art, have seemed higher realities, or the expression of higher realities to which we owe allegiance. In a one-leveled world, they can be interpreted only, in contrast to what "really" is, as artifacts, as what we have *made* in contrast to what naturally exists.[8]

The fact that what a particular culture calls the "higher" is not really so but rather is only that which is made to appear as such necessarily implies the essentially arbitrary character of all cultures. Philosophical nominalism, then, would appear to be an inevitable result of such a position and Thomas Hobbes was surely correct in calling attention to the political difficulties which arise from within the nominalist perspective. Yet Hobbes' analysis may not have been radical enough. For him nominalism was a political problem because of the number of voices (the church, the state, and the universities) which attempted to set the values for society. His solution, therefore, was simply to restrict the advantage of defining the public good

to one person, i.e. the sovereign. Indeed such a recommendation may solve the problem of pluralism but it does not address the more important issue of legitimacy. Perhaps Hobbes' simple mechanistic psychology blinded him to man's serious need for meaning. Yet it is certainly questionable whether a society in which all of its members were convinced of the purely arbitrary nature of their deepest commitments could be either politically viable or conducive for true human happiness.[9]

History

A similar process of delegitimation has occurred for those who have turned to history as a source for meaning and social purpose. In both its cyclical and linear interpretations, history has often been understood as a source of information which allows man to "locate" the events of his particular time within a larger dramatic context and thereby explain their deeper meaning or significance. For example, both Polybius and Machiavelli referred to history's cyclical pattern to explain what otherwise may have appeared to be the meaningless collapse of once vibrant civilizations. Similarly in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Israel there emerged a tradition of historiogenic speculation which attempted to trace a relationship between the pragmatic events of the day and the actual creation of the cosmic order itself.

Within the West the most important form of historical speculation has been that which is represented by orthodox Christianity in general and Augustine in particular. According to Augustine the events of profane history are understood as being meaningful only insofar as they are related to the more important developments of sacred history. The latter, in turn, is essentially completed inasmuch as God has achieved a reconciliation with mankind through the incarnation of Christ. According to Augustine, the significance of history is set once and for all, and all men may share in its meaning through an act of faith. In particular, every individual may find meaning in his life by participating in the eternal presence of God whose truth has been revealed in time. From this perspective, then, history is able to serve as a source of meaning only because its theme is completed and its significance transcends the realm of pragmatic events.

In the modern age beginning with the Enlightenment, the Christian understanding of history has given way to the various forms of progressivism. In either its liberal or Marxist form, progressivism assumes that history is a series of ordered events which is moving beyond the present order toward a future point in time which is both different from and superior to the present. Some thinkers, such as Voltaire and Condorcet, envisioned a future age which would be characterized by the excellence of man's universal human spirit. Others, such as Hegel and Marx, wrote of the transcending of alienation; while still others, such as Comte and Saint-Simon, foresaw the development of a harmonious technocratic society. As different as these end goals may have been, each form of progressivist historiography shared a common structure. Specifically history was understood to possess its own immanent goal and to contain those processes which would eventuate in its realization. Accordingly, the present found its only meaning in its contribution to

the future. Yet inasmuch as the future was an intramundane rather than a transcendental condition, the present could never share in the meaning of that stage to which it contributed. In short, progressivist historiography denied the possibility of a meaningful "here and now." Unavoidably living in the present, man, his institutions, and his commitments were necessarily incomplete. Referring to this condition as exemplified in the historiography of Turgot, Eric Voegelin writes:

> Turgot transposes the Christian dichotomy of sacred and profane history into the context of intramundane thought through his dichotomy of the "thread of progress" and the vast historical ups and downs which have no meaning in themselves. However he cannot extract from the "sacred" thread of progress a meaning for the spiritual destiny of the concrete person . . . Since the finite lines of meaning, which can be found in the civilizational process, can have no meaning for man as a spiritual person, man and his concrete problems have to be brushed aside. Since concrete man cannot be the subject for whom history has a meaning, the subject as to be changed — man is replaced by the *masse totale*.[10]

By treating the present as a means to an end, progressivist historiography suggests that the present moment lacks its own intrinsic worth. As such progressivism delegitimates the present and thereby calls into question its ability to serve as a source of meaning for man or his community. From the progressivist perspective, history is necessarily incomplete and, as such, is incapable of revealing that meaningful order by which its events can be arranged so as to form a coherent whole. Modern historiography does indeed seek for meaning from history. Yet whereas the Christian tradition sought to recognize those moments of meaning *within* history, modernity seeks the meaning *of* history itself.

Conclusion

If the above arguments are correct, the difficulty of creating a sense of community during the modern age is due to more than the mere rapidity of technological change or the increased division of labor within contemporary industry. Rather I have suggested that the modern understanding of both nature and history have deprived the political community of that ontological ground upon which it originally based its claim to legitimacy. Not surprisingly, then, social contract theorizing has become the most important means for justifying political rule since the 17th century. Yet, inasmuch as the will is unable to take its bearings from either the goods of nature or the present significance of history, it, too, is ultimately arbitrary and thus devoid of true authority.

This situation is not entirely without precedent. Indeed Hellenistic political thought was characterized by a similar concern for what appeared to be the arbitray nature of man's political order. Yet in Hellenistic culture this social meaninglessness and personal isolation was the result of the destruction of the Greek *polis* and

its accompanying philosophical traditions while today this same condition represents the very achievement of the modern project itself. Modernity began in an effort to establish the sovereignty of man. As such the Industrial Revolution aspired to gain control over the forces of nature while the French Revolution embodied a similar desire to control man's political and historical destiny. By treating both nature and history as open fields which provide the material for an essentially human project modernity has succeeded in liberating the individual personality to an hitherto unrealized degree. The question remains, however, whether such a liberation can be brought into balance with the needs of man's social and political nature.

Department of Political Science
Loyola University of Chicago

Notes

1. An example of such dating according to themes from within philosophy can be found in the work of Tilo Schabert. See his *Gewalt und Humanitaet* (Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 1978). At the same time an examination of social, economic, and political factors leads to a similar dating. See Reinhard Bendix, *Embattled Reason: Essays on Social Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
2. Peter Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 75.
3. Roberto Unger, *Law in Modern Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), p. 266.
4. Glenn Tinder, *Community: Reflections on a Tragic Ideal* (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1980).
5. Tinder, *Community*, p. 2.
6. Thus in commenting on the work of Arnold Gehlen, Peter Berger writes: "Archaic institutions are highly objective; that is, they are experienced as inevitable, to-be-relied-upon facts, analogous to the facts of nature. Modern institutions, by contrast, are deficient in this objectivity. They are readily seen and indeed experienced as ad hoc constructions, here and now and possibly gone tomorrow, in any case not to be taken for granted and always open to radical change." Peter Berger, "Forward", in Arnold Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology*, trans. Patricia Lipscomb (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. xi.
7. This summary of Greek science is based upon F.M. Cornford, *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 81-94.
8. Marjorie Grene, *Philosophy in and out of Europe* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1976), p. 159.
9. See Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971).
10. Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, ed. John H. Hallowell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), p. 94.