

Notes

Wasn't the World always Modern?

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It is time to rethink the very category of 'Modern' and its derivatives, Medieval and Ancient; time, in fact, to rethink the whole problematic of historical periodisation.

By most indices, the world we inhabit today is the very epitome of modernity, even as distinct survivals of the distant past are an integral part of our daily life. One wonders how the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries will be characterised in, say, the 22nd or the 23rd century. 'Modern'? Very unlikely, for modernity would have acquired a different set of markers and perhaps meaning. And surely not Medieval or Ancient or any variation of these. It's time perhaps to rethink the very category of 'Modern' and its derivatives, Medieval and Ancient – time, in other words, to rethink the whole problematic of historical periodisation. Indeed, the discipline of history is abuzz with numerous questions on the theme springing up everywhere within the academia. Not a fragment is left of what was 'out there' (in the late C.A. Bayly's words) for everyone to see and absorb with nary a doubt in anyone's mind just a quarter of a century ago; today it lies in a shambles.

Markers of time

The markers to distinguish the present from the past are understandably present at all times and in all civilisations. For everyone living, say, in the 10th century BC would be aware that they were living in the present as distinct from the past; some of them did employ the term 'modern' to articulate the distinction; others may not have. In Balmiki's *Ramayan* (on present reckoning, some six to three centuries prior to the Mauryan period) when Ram prepares to go into exile, the more impatient Lakshman argues with him to defy their father's command. Ram then calms him by pointing out that while the present times they lived in

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(*adhyatan*) were in some ways different, yet in some other ways were similar to the past and parallel situations had occurred earlier too. In Islam there was the constant lament that times had changed, leaving behind the puritanical age of the Prophet and the first four 'pious' Caliphs, even as three of them had fallen to assassins' daggers. To my knowledge, no specific term was used to identify the distinction between the present and the past, even as *tarikh* to denote the past would necessarily imply its awareness. In Europe, 'modern' was first used in the 5th-6th centuries as a descriptive term for the present with no value attached to it.

Division of history

Emphatic transformation in the significance of the 'modern' occurred when post-Renaissance and post-Enlightenment Europe invested it with what it assumed was the universal value of rationality. Once this self-image of the age was defined, the 'medieval', or the 'dark age' of religiosity and superstition was also bestowed an identity, not its own but as rationality's or modernity's 'other', thus reinforcing it. 'Antiquity', now post-Renaissance investing it with rationality that was compatible with the wide spread phenomenon of slavery, also came along as the legitimising source of modernity. These were clearly derivatives of the 'modern'. By 1688, the tripartite division of historical time had been formalised by German historian Cellarius, even as its origins lay in Christian theological debates. The rise of Positivism from the 18th century gave a 'scientific' edge to rationality. It came to acquire an 'objective' existence immune to mutation through human intervention.

We thus get a construction of ideal types of historical temporality with clear-cut attributes, though these had only a provincial provenance, that is Europe. As Europe expanded to the rest of the world with its trade and arms and very soon its governance structures, its displacement of other regional intellectual constructs followed. The varied notions of historical time in the Indian, Chinese, Japanese, the Arab-Islamic and other civilisations gave way to the tripartite division of history which became universalised by the late 19th-early 20th century. For a pretty long time, the entirety of the long 'Middle Ages' was set off by historians as the era of encompassing stagnation to highlight the rapidity of transformations brought about by reason, science and technology – that is, by 'modernity'. As doubts about the notion of stagnation began to crop up, the three-fold division began to get qualified into Late Antiquity, Early Medieval, Late Medieval, Early Modern, etc in Europe for the original temporal slabs were far too large to reveal the underlying restiveness and energy for change. This too has induced

revision of large temporal blocks elsewhere. But the basic structure remained — still remains — intact.

Idea of modernity

However, the global scrutiny chasing it underscores the increasing discomfort with the received idea of modernity and therefore with all its derivatives. A telling example is two observations spread over 30-odd years by the same major intellectual of our times, S.N. Eisenstadt. In 1966, he had confidently stated, 'historically, modernisation is the process of change towards those types of social, economic and political systems that have developed in Western Europe and North America from the 17th century to the 19th'. By 1998, he was less confident about it and announced, 'That there is only one modernity is a fallacy'.

It is getting increasingly hard to argue for modernity as a temporally and territorially limited category in origin, as the gift of Europe to humanity during the 18th to 20th centuries with industry, electoral democracy, capitalism, individualism, secularism, etc as its hallmarks. The discipline has come to recognise that this world of ours has evolved as a cumulative effect of a range of contributions by all societies and civilisations in various spheres and varying degrees throughout the past in terms of crops or crafts, trade or transport, culture or philosophy, concepts or aesthetics, you name it.

One specific feature that is attributed to modernity is the fast pace of change. It, however, ignores that the pace of change itself is the cumulative effect of the past. It also ignores that several clusters of innovations at various time periods in different societies accelerated encompassing changes with universal impact. Just two quick examples. The inventions/evolution of advanced compass, gunpowder, and printing in China in the 9th-10th centuries were soon to overwhelm the world quickly, by the standards of those times. The shift of European agriculture from two-field to three-field rotation in the first two centuries after 1000 AD gave it a 100 per cent increase in food availability, which led to rapid, comprehensive transformation of its social, economic, even political landscape with far-reaching consequences beyond its boundaries. The world was rapidly 'modernised' in pronounced ways. Stories of this kind are on record in various regions and times. It is also evident in current historiography that besides commodities, techniques, ideas and concepts were travelling around vast stretches of the globe at a much faster pace over the centuries and the millennia than had been given credit, a denial predicated upon the notion of stagnation and the dark ages. Much change inheres in continuity even as much continuity is embedded in change.

Thus, as the perspectives of history are getting redefined, do we still need the old temporal straitjackets, the old labels? It must be emphasised that however 'modern' and its derivatives are modified, there is no getting away from the value embedded in these which singularly locates rationality in Europe and to a certain period. What is left to other regions is to assess their proximity to the model in a sort of 'me-too-ism' exercise.

How do we then escape the trap? The fact that the tripartite division is a rather recent conceptual construct which is getting constantly modified underlines its transience. In another century or two, it is most likely to be displaced by some other construct, less burdened with a baggage. Perhaps we could anticipate some of that transition by studying history in more value-neutral temporal brackets, like centuries: How societies/economies/cultures changed from, say, 5th to 10th or 14th to 18th centuries? How much more useful it would be to drop 'medieval' or 'early modern' from it! In the end, these terms have become more like slogans than helpful analytical categories.

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