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# The Sediments of Modernity

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## NOTES AND DISCUSSION

### THE SEDIMENTS OF MODERNITY

A Review of Benjamin Nelson's *Der Ursprung der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977).

I.) In this collection of his selected writings (translated into German) Benjamin Nelson stresses two critical points in the development of western Europe: the 12/13th and the 16/17th centuries. In respect to the ethical and scientific innovations of these two watersheds of European and even universal historical evolution<sup>1</sup>, he tries to explain the problems of contemporary "modernity"—the "breathless 'take-off' of our own century."<sup>2</sup> Nelson's criteria for marking these epochs are "rational structures of 'conscience' "<sup>3</sup> and the "fight in the name of certitude and truth."<sup>4</sup> The antagonists of his breakthrough to modernity are "Fideism" and scientific "Fictionalism" and "probabilism." The intellectual movement of the 12/13th century avoids "Fideism" by turning towards the universality of discourses. The attack of "conscience" in scientific and moral sense pushes back "Probabilism" and "Casuistry" in the 16/17th century. The 20th century is founded in the name of these new principles—but the world-wide accusation of Western rational civilization is established too.<sup>5</sup>

With this concept of modernity Nelson stands "On the Shoulders of the Giants": Max Weber, J. Needham, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and H.S. Maine. While Freud is included too, only one of the great thinkers of the 19th century in the scope of sociology is not mentioned: Karl Marx. With the work of Marx left out, an essential sediment of "modernity" is neglected: the specific dynamics of historical progress.

II.) In a current German discussion of history and the history of ideas, the conception of "Sattelzeit" (1750–1850) is not unimportant. The dictionary, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck) is built up on this decisive turning point of eras: "Notions of this time have the face of Janus: looking back, they describe social and political facts which are not understandable today without translation and interpretation; looking forward and looking toward us, they have a familiar meaning which no longer needs any translation."<sup>6</sup> Here is a further accentuation of the process of European development. A new social experience is superimposed upon the ethical, scientific, and, last but not least, theological revolutions of 12/13th and 16/17th centuries: the emergence of "history" itself. In the German language, the shift from the plural "Geschichten" to the singular "Geschichte" indicates the conscience of "history" as a self-moving process, as its own subject.<sup>7</sup> The movement of "historical time" begins to accelerate; a new "Erwartungshorizont" (horizon of anticipation) separates itself from the old and familiar "Erwartungsraum" (space of experience).<sup>8</sup> At the same time, new sciences are developing: the "philosophy of history," a new "philosophical anthropology" and "philosophical aesthetics." It can be argued that they are a human attempt to compensate for the frightening gulf between "Herkunft" und "Zukunft."<sup>9</sup>

III.) This third era of western European development is well-known under the

names of "the Enlightenment" and "the Industrial Revolution," the latter better understood as a "Proto-Industrialization" accompanied by a commercialization of agriculture. In these economic movements we have to search for the ground for the experience of changing world.<sup>10</sup>

Under a more theoretical aspect, both events are the result of a special organization of labour in the occident. Max Weber didn't reject this critical point of Marx; on the contrary: he accepted the "rational-capitalistic organization of (formal) free labour" as a precondition of occidental economic and cultural superiority.<sup>11</sup> It is what Marx called the "civilizing side" of capitalist accumulation: in comparison with other forms of society and surplus-appropriation, it is a form most conducive to the development of productivity.<sup>12</sup> To put the question of Paul M. Sweezy in the so-called "Transition-Debate" once more: the "prime mover" of feudalism, the "struggle for rent" may increase the productivity of society—but it also may lead to a "marasmus" of economic growth.<sup>13</sup> So the perspectives of these centuries were not an anticipation of general "progress." After the prosperity of the 12/13th century<sup>14</sup> follows the decline of the 14th century<sup>15</sup>; after the commercial-capitalist take-off of the 16th century the (at least) regional stagnation of the 17th.<sup>16</sup>

I think that the general rule under which all particular "progresses" in ethics and sciences of these times can be subsumed is a "Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe."<sup>17</sup> Moral, political and scientific innovations had to stabilize the ups and downs of a cyclic historical movement. Even the famous "perpetual and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death" of Thomas Hobbes seems not to be the motor of unrestricted progress. It is only to "procure" and "assure" human life, and man would be content "with a moderate power: but [because] he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more."<sup>18</sup> Not *volens* but *volens* mankind has given up the political ideal of stability.

It is not until the new economy of Adam Smith that the concept of perpetual economic growth breaks through. This changing self-consciousness can be indicated by the way Smith mentions China. China is no longer the admired stronghold of order and stability;<sup>19</sup> it is only a stagnating economy with no good expectations for high wage-rates.<sup>20</sup>

IV.) To sum up: there is evidence that it isn't possible to explain the "modernity" of contemporary western capitalism (which continues to spread—the old Leitmotiv of Max Weber—all over the world) without mentioning the general shift in the midst of the 18th century. The early European innovations of ethics and sciences have changed their functions in this new social environment. To speak with Marx: the "allgemeine Beleuchtung" (general illumination) in the mode of production has changed.<sup>21</sup> It is the very considerable difference between a "progressive possession of the world" and a "world-possessive progress."<sup>22</sup> The first notion is significant for the older form of "modernity," the other is our "modernity" today. In the first case, man tries to become the subject of his history; today history is the active subject of history—and man is submitted to a strange process, which is out of his control. It's just this process of capitalist accumulation which Marx declared to be the "self-moving substance" of history.<sup>23</sup>

Naturally, Marx's 19th-century concept of how to stop this self-moving history are obsolete. His idea that the process itself will bring forth its own antidote is a

derivation of Hegels "philosophy of history" and ultimately a result of temporalizing and secularizing Christian theodicy.<sup>24</sup> But even in the critique of vulgar Marxism, the idea of an historical "emergency brake" remains. In 1939/40 Walter Benjamin writes in connection with his "Über den Begriff der Geschichte": "Marx says, the revolutions are the locomotive of universal history. But perhaps it isn't so. Maybe the revolutions are the attempt of mankind, travelling in this train, to reach the emergency brake."<sup>25</sup> If Benjamin is right: where is the emergency brake and who can pull it?

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#### NOTES

1. Benjamin Nelson, *Der Ursprung der Moderne. Vergleichende Studien zum Zivilisationsprozess* (Frankfurt, 1977), p. 141.

2. Nelson, p. 96.

3. Nelson, p. 80.

4. Nelson, p. 105.

5. Nelson, p. 89.

6. Reinhart Koselleck: "Richtlinien für das Lexikon politisch-sozialer Begriffe der Neuzeit," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 11 (1967): 82.

7. Koselleck: "Historia Magistra Vitae," in: Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt, 1979), pp. 38 ff.

8. Koselleck " 'Erfahrungsraum' und 'Erwartungshorizont' —zwei historische Kategorien," pp. 349 ff.

9. Odo Marquard, "Der angeklagte und der entlastete Mensch in der Philosophie des 18. Jahrhunderts," in: Marquard: *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen* (Stuttgart, 1981), p. 42.

10. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. Politische und ökonomische Ursprünge von Gesellschaften und Wirtschaftssystemen* (Frankfurt: 1978), p. 59 ff.

11. Max Weber, "Vorbemerkung zu den gesammelten Aufsätzen zur Religionssoziologie," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, (1920/21) Vol. 1, pp. 1 ff.

12. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol. I (Marx-Engels Werke, Vol. 25) (Berlin: 1964), p. 827.

13. R. H. Hilton, "Y eut-il une crise générale de la féodalité?" in: *Annales E.S.C.*, 6 (1951): 29. See, in general, Rodney Hilton, (ed.), *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1976).

14. Georges Duby, *Krieger und Bauern. Die Entwicklung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft im frühen Mittelalter* (Frankfurt, 1977), pp. 216 ff.

15. Jacques le Goff, *Das Hochmittelalter* (Fischer-Weltgeschichte, Vol 11) (Frankfurt, 1965), pp. 277 ff. Guy Bois, *Crise du féodalisme. Economie rurale et démographie en Normandie orientale du début du 14e siècle au milieu du 16e siècle* (Paris, 1976).

16. Jan de Vries, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis 1600-1750* (2nd ed.) (Cambridge, 1978).

17. Theodore K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1975).

18. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by C.B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth), p. 161.

19. Louis Dumont, *Homo aequalis. Genèse et épanouissement de l'idéologie économique* (Paris, 1977), p. 52.

20. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. by A. Skinner (Harmondsworth, 1974), pp.174 f.
21. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (Rohentwurf) (Berlin, 1953), p. 27.
22. Christian Meier, "Ein antikes Äquivalent des Fortschrittsgedankens: das 'Könnens-Bewusstsein' des 5. Jahrhunderts," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 226 (1978): 292 ff.
23. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol. I, in, Marx-Engels Werke, Vol. 23 (Berlin, 1962), p. 169.
24. Odo Marquard, *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen*, pp. 47 ff.
25. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Werkausgabe Edition Suhrkamp), Vol. I/3 (Frankfurt, 1980), p. 1232.