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Topic Essay 1: Understanding the Modern

Like many terms used to describe history and the events associated with it, modernity comes out to be a bit ambiguous, if not vague to interpret. To make a valid interpretation, one has to delve into how modernity came about and how do we define it. Furthermore, one would have to relate how modernity impacts what is today and ask if there are indeed multiple modernities that exist, if not coexist. This paper will address all these questions for the better understanding of what modern truly means.

To understand how modernity came about, one must look at its origin; in this case, the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a period in world history where change and reform were sought after, achieved by applications in reasoning and science. Regarding reasoning, the Enlightenment provided ground for the Great Awakening which deemphasized the importance of religious thought and instead supported individualism and spirituality¹. In today's modernity, the growth and acceptance of atheism and agnosticism seems to have been a direct result of the Great Awakening. Regarding science, the Enlightenment brought forth advancements in medicine and surgery. In fact, a parallel can be drawn to the awareness of public health and hygiene that hospitals and armies called for throughout the 1700s-1800s to today where influenza and obesity are the culprits for such awareness². If anything, the parallels between modernity and the Enlightenment suggests that the two eras are much related in ideals.

Establishing the relationship of modernity and the Enlightenment, the focus now heads to how is modernity defined? According to one source, modernity can be defined as accurately as

its sphere of influence where all regions involved are on the same page with regards to accepting and living concurrently with technology and up-to-date ideals. Namely, the author points to how the West (Europe and North America) can be the only modern world in strict sense versus the East which accepts “alternative modernities³.” “Alternative modernities,” the author describes, are ones that accept different ideologies, forms of government (i.e. communism), etc. Another article asserts that modernity shouldn’t be connected with the past; instead, modernity is a concept that changes continuously⁴. The author further explains that modernity should be approached with an attitude with respect to it, not approached as a unit of time. In other words, what constitutes modernity is the contributions to it and ultimately, the present day is the reflection of such contributions.

It is without doubt that modernity has impacted various ideas in thought, society and culture. The scientific revolution of the 17th century certainly has shaped modernity as its effects continue to be felt today. From the revolution, thought became more scientific than religious. As a result of this, gradual developments in technology based on calculations and experimental reasoning is what today’s standard of living (i.e. economy, living style and accommodations, thanks to inventions) is cemented on. Relatedly, the modern society of today is built on the political revolutions of the 18th century; John Locke, an English philosopher, has written a great deal on the rights of liberty and equality that citizens should uphold, setting the basis for the U.S. constitution, among others⁵. Culture-wise, modernity tends to do away with anything old and accept the new. In an extreme example, disease can be a part of life with regards of being vaccinated against it or unfortunately catching it. Smallpox was a disease that was widespread in older cultures of the 1600s-1900s and earlier⁶. Inevitably, as technology and science gave way to

a cure for the disease, it disappeared completely at the present time⁷. As a result, today's modern culture focuses on curing other diseases that have become pandemics (cancer, AIDs, etc.).

The thought of there being multiple modernities has already been touched on earlier in the paper. As the world is diverse, not all regions can adapt together to being modern in only one strict definition resulting in different countries taking on meanings of being modern (many using religion as a basis, and rejecting certain technological products in the process). In fact, the terms "Second World" and "Third World" countries reflect that notion⁸. However, there are situations where regions have struggled with adopting modernity of the West, like Latin America after its countries achieved independence⁹. Specifically, the formations of republics based on U.S./French ideas were ill prepared. Despite this, the U.S. would continuously influence Latin America (both politically and socially) where modern ideas were eventually adapted, albeit limitedly.

In contrast, the idea that multiple modernities exist can be explained in another way; from within. Typically, not all generations of human beings share the perks of what each era gives. For example, a generation encompassing the 1950s-1970s can expect a different view of what is modern in contrast to a generation encompassing the 1990s-2010s. For one thing, these separate generations grew up on different ideologies, different cultures that run the gamut (from music to movies), and different technologies (with regards to how primitive/advanced the said technology is). And second, time is constant; one generation can call theirs modern but it doesn't stop from being eclipsed and displaced by a new one to which the "new" modern becomes the incumbent generation. So in this regard, multiple modernities can exist; it all matters on taking things into perspective of time.

In conclusion, understanding the modern is all about interpreting the concept as either an ever changing variable or a metaphor for what encompasses the present day. Alternative modernities do exist in my opinion because of the varied ways of practicing what is accepted in current time. Either way, history is ultimately the forerunner for peoples of all societies to move forward as eventually, the future will be shaped upon what arises from today.

Foot Note Sources

- 1: http://americanhistory.about.com/od/colonialamerica/p/great_awakening.htm (time line)
- 2: <http://www.similima.com/medicine-and-surgery-before-1800-the-enlightenment> (time line)
- 3: “Dirlik Modernity”
- 4: “Michel Foucault. What is Enlightenment?”
- 5: http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/enlightenment_age.html (time line)
- 6: http://whqlibdoc.who.int/smallpox/9241561106_chp5.pdf (time line)
- 7: <http://www.jenner.ac.uk/edwardjenner> (time line)
- 8: “Putting the nation in its place? : World history and C.A. Bayly’s The Birth of the Modern World”
- 9: “Non-Western Enlightenment: Tupac Amaru II, born Jose Gabriel Condorcanqui”