Alternative Modernities

Islamism and Secularism on Charles Taylor

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In his short article ‘Two Theories of Modernity’ Charles Taylor makes a distinction between what he calls ‘cultural’ and ‘acultural’ ways of understanding the rise of modernity. For Taylor the cultural theory of modernity conceives of the changes separating Western moderns from their medieval forebears mainly ‘in terms of the rise of a new culture’ (Taylor, 1995: 24). Here the focus is on the transition to modernity ‘in terms of the specific cultures it carries us from and to’ (1995: 24). Western modernity being thus powered by its own original ‘visions of the good’ (1995: 26). Correspondingly, in cultural theories the notion of progress is problematized.

The acultural theory by contrast understands the transformations that have produced the modern West ‘in terms of some culture-neutral operation’ (1995: 24). Here modernity may be conceived of as the growth of reason for example, issuing in a set of changes that any and every culture can go through as its members begin, or are forced to see, that previously held beliefs are erroneous or even self-deluding. Alternatively, social and economic developments may themselves be held responsible for the possibility of this freeing of rationality, which in time shines its light back on the conditions of its own liberation, in order to transform them in turn. However conceived, acultural theories of modernity read these changes as the result or cause of the dissipation of certain beliefs in the light of new, truer claims. Correspondingly, in this model the notion of cultural equality is problematized.

Taylor’s displeasure with the acultural theory of modernity may seem to implicate him in a form of cultural relativism. For any particular culture is taken to encompass an ensemble of practices and ideas regarding ‘personhood, social relations, states of mind/soul, goods and bads, virtues and vices, etc.’ (1995: 24), and is unified to the extent that it is viewed as a single constellation among others, as a member of the plurality of human cultures.

Yet Taylor is concerned to trace whether and in what ways the changes named ‘modernity’ can be understood as a progressive gain for the ‘contemporary Atlantic world’ (i.e. the modern West) over and above the ideals and culture of its predecessors in medieval Europe. Of course such a claim may be presumed to extend potentially to other pre-modern cultures as well, immediately the modern West is defined culturally and as superior in important ways to its past. Nevertheless Taylor is careful to note that this net moral gain brought about by modernity vis-a-vis Christendom is not necessarily better than the ideas of the good, or the social imaginary, which constitutes and particularizes the cultures of other contemporary (non-Western) societies. To make this claim would presuppose a comparison between modernity’s original vision, including the changes produced by this vision’s outwarding, and the original visions of the other contending cultures. As any conclusions on this matter would be invariably provisional, Taylor is driven to consider a politics of recognition, to avoid the common sin of acultural theories in thinking that all other societies are fated to become like the West, once they shed untenable beliefs.

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After this cursory introduction I want to stop abruptly here and jump rather precipitately to Istanbul, to try and see who it is in the bitter political struggle there that is more prone to cultural reconstructions of modernity and of the founding of the Turkish Republic, and who favours more acultural approaches. For cultural and acultural narratives of modernity are of interest not merely to historians and social theorists: constituent of the present by dint of their ability to order the past, such narratives are also political visions of and scripts for the future, as well as ideological fictions that protect interests and maintain inequalities. Indeed, in the context of the enlightened absolutism that constitutes the signature of Turkish modernization, cultural and acultural theories of modernity are live ammunition.

To illustrate the way cultural and acultural conceptualizations of modernity are ‘operationalized’ in Turkish political discourse, longish extracts from two newspaper articles will be given. The first was written by Muhammed Han Kavani and published in the Islamist daily Yeni Safak (New Dawn). The piece is entitled ‘Turkey: Country in the Centre of the Civilization War’, and though unremarkable, is representative enough of what may be called a standard Islamist position.

At the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, with the connivance of the new Crusaders and the Zionists, Islam’s last castle, the Ottoman State and the Caliphate, was finally destroyed. And now, in order to stop its being revived, the time has come to take new precautions. To do this a social engineering project has been put in place. But it is abundantly obvious that this project has not been totally successful. Yes, our Muslim identity, our women’s covered heads, our men’s beards, our flag’s star and crescent, our mosques, our minarets, the call to prayer, the teaching and preaching schools, all of these make [the West] uncomfortable, because they show that Western civilization has not yet established its domination over Turkey. The greatest warriors in this struggle are the Anatolian people. For despite all the obstacles manufactured by the Government, to protect their own identity against the West’s social engineering project the people still opened up their [schools and] Koran courses...

Now we need to ask: why are these schools seen as so dangerous that they...
have to be closed down? In fact the answer is simple. In order for Western Civilization to be bedded down in Turkey the people's relationship with their own 1000-year history needs to be cut. Accordingly while banning the Ottoman language and the official history was invented and taught to the people. The graduates of these schools enter the archives and study the documents on which the true history is based so as to restore the memory of the people. This is a great threat to a regime which has always used a 'divide and rule' strategy to govern by artificially separating the people into leftists and rightists. Communists-Islamists, Alevi-Sunni, Kurds-Turks or religious-secular. But the people's sole unifying element is Islam and our shared history. . .

The second extract is from the book A Handful of Enlightenment, a collection of Aziz Nəsin's newspaper writings. The original article was published in May 1993 in the newspaper Aydinlik (Enlightenment) and is entitled 'The Lying Ataturkists'.

'Hey you, are you Ataturkists?' I hear 'Yes' from the great majority. 'And are you liars?' I ask. 'No', I hear, from everybody at once. Our generation didn't learn about Ataturk merely from books. We lived Ataturk. However, even those my age who are still living have appeared to forget what was and wasn't done in Ataturk's time. Yet the majority still consider themselves Ataturkists. ... For example in Ataturk's time there was no such thing as visiting tombs, or soliciting help from the graves of saints, or lighting candles at their mosques, or throwing money into the green tins of those who have been to Mecca. Only after Ataturk died were these things done. But you were all Ataturkists, and you didn't say a thing. ... For example 400 years after the Bible was translated into the vernacular, Ataturk had both the Koran and the call to prayer changed to Turkish. At his death once again we heard the call to prayer in Arabic. You Ataturkists didn't say a thing. ... For example in Ataturk's time it was forbidden to open the nests of reaction that are called Koran courses. After his death, not merely in every province, but in every district, even in every quarter, Koran courses were opened. And at this you didn't make - and are not making - a sound. ... For example in the thirty days of Ramazan, because of the pressure of the Muslims, in the whole of Turkey outside of the three big cities, water and cigarettes can't be consumed, food eaten, and even in the big cities places to drink close down. While the sign 'reserved for families' shames us as it separates the women from the men for those whose sexual organs are found in their eyes, and while police wait at the university gates like sentries and feel free to strike the female students for wearing short-sleeved shirts, while all these things happen in Turkey do you still call yourself Ataturkists? . . . How fortunate I am to have never been an Ataturkist. . . .

At first glance it would appear that Islamist discourse is inclined to a cultural theory of modernity. However, as Taylor's positive evaluation of the possibilities opened up by its original spirit. This is hardly surprising as Islamist discourse is partial to occidentalist rhetoric and quite happy to argue for a version of cultural alterity between Islam and other civilizations. Because it is not interested in the project of retrieving the original possibilities inherent in either Western modernity or Turkish-Republican reformism however, it is tempted to define modernity in naturalist terms. This means it is also attracted to negative acultural critiques of Western modernity that conceive it as a rationality gone wild, or as a civilization devoid of affective emotion. Nevertheless, because it is faced with the task of cajoling possible participants into the movement, it requires a definitive other against which to constitute itself. For this reason, cultural narratives of modernity which logically problematize the claimed superiority of the West (i.e. that see Western modernity as one culture among others) are preferred. Understood in this way, modernity is immediately relativized. This is not merely to prepare the way for Islamist claims, but to open up modernity to the realm of political debate. For who can argue with science, or the class that implements it?

Kemalism, on the other hand is resolutely acultural in its conception of modernity. In defending its reforms as interventions against ignorance and backwardness, it finds it difficult to understand how anyone can persist in hankering perversely after a past so definitively succeeded. As the 1931 statutes of the Republican People's Party state, 'The Party has accepted that all laws, regulations and procedures used in the administration of this state should be prepared and implemented ... in accordance with the foundations of and the forms provided by science and technology in modern times' (Mardin, 1993: 365). Yet Kemalism also admits an explicit cultural theory of modernity. Its reforms were made not only in the name of reason, but also in the name of the universal civilization, by which it meant the West. Western civilization is universal precisely because it has already been purified by the white heat of rationality and science. Islam in this case is granted the status of civilization too, but one manifestly inferior to its rival. If Islamist discourse denies Western modernity any progressivist tendencies, Kemalism inscribes it with Hegelian potentialities.

At the same time Kemalism, while embracing an acultural interpretation of modernity in conforming the Republic to the universal requirements of progress and reason, also incarnated a virulent Turkish nationalism, paradoxically attempting to give voice at the same time to its particular cultural paraphernalia. Taylor's 'Two Theories of Modernity' is noticeable for the absence of any mention of nationalism. Yet acultural theories of modernity, when translated into the nation-building projects of non-Western (postcolonial) states, are also implicated in that state's effort to construct a hegemonic national identity, against other possible regional or local identities. That is, the newly created national identity is valorized as more open to the 'modern', in contradistinction to other, suddenly particularistic 'local' or 'ethnic' identities. Consequently those with a penchant for the 'pre-modern' (read Islam) are seen as deliberately wilful in their denial of progress, while those who resist the national identity in the name of their own ethnic particularity need to be assimilated for their own good. Both are feared not merely because they threaten national unity, but because they are discursively situated as imperiling the very direction of history. In postcolonial contexts cultural narratives invariably meld with acultural narratives of modernity to legitimize the new nation and ultimately its protector and representative, the state. Taylor's two possible 'takes' on the rise of modernity in the West should be seen then in the alternative modernity of Turkey as complementary narratives ordering
Let us jump back again quickly to Taylor’s ‘Two Theories of Modernity’. What our brief excursion to Istanbul showed us, if anything, is that the defining characteristics of Turkish history and identity are inherently contestable: the right to define the culture is the prize fought over in the competition for the state. It also demonstrated how polarized the debates have become. We noticed as well that in the alternative modernity of Turkey both cultural and acultural narratives of modernity are utilized to constitute and justify the national project. Why then does Taylor argue for the cultural model as a necessary corrective to acultural ways of conceptualizing the rise of modernity? For Taylor, acultural theories embody a form of ethnocentrism of the present. In reading the changes constitutive of modernity as affects of the development of natural science, acultural theories end up making our ancestors look too much like ourselves. Here moderns are merely anachronisms with a purified perspective, having thrown off beliefs and doctrines long feted on ignorance; we exist thereafter in the realm of value-free truths. Among these may be numbered, as a matter of course, the ‘fact’ that ‘we are not individuals, impelled to operate by instrumental reason, maximizing our advantage when we are deterred from doing so by unfounded belief’ (Taylor, 1995: 31). Our new situation may be evaluated as tragic and absurd, or liberating and triumphant. Whichever, it is inscribed as inescapable.

But Taylor argues that what makes us different from our forebears is not our explicit beliefs and doctrines, but what he calls our different ‘background understandings’ (or social imaginary) against which these more formulated beliefs are held. For Taylor the rise of modernity is predicated upon, or intimately associated with, a change in our embodied background understandings: and these include new ways of understanding ourselves as persons, our relationship to God, to other humans, to the world, to time, etc.

In the same way acultural accounts of the rise of modernity lead to ethnocentrism vis-a-vis non-Western cultures. For in ignoring the cultural transformation (i.e. the change in implicit self-understanding, etc.) that informs modernity, acultural theory takes for granted that all cultures have to experience the same social changes as the West. Correspondingly, for modernizing theories, once the procedure of Enlightenment is embarked upon, all cultures will end up looking the same – which means, as Taylor notes, the same as us.

This concern with the ethnocentric ramifications of acultural theories is in keeping with Taylor’s defence of cultural self-determination for French-speakers in Quebec, where the maintenance of cultural difference is recognized as a collective right alongside the individual rights of citizenship. Because cultural particularity is dialogically constituted, Taylor takes it for granted that the non-recognition of cultural difference is a form of latent violence: as identity is dependent on exchange with others, non-recognition actively extinguishes identity. (There is, though, a slight circularity in the argument – if identity is relational, ‘mis-recognition’ is analytically impossible.) Cultural identity in this understanding is constituted in the construction of narratives, somewhat similarly to the way individuals understand themselves only in relation to others. Taylor thus conflates the constitution of the self and the cultural: though qualitatively different spheres of existence, they are linked through the principle of the narrative construction of both. Narrativized identity operates then on two levels:

... in the intimate sphere, where we understand the formation of identity and the self as taking place in a continuing dialogue and struggle with significant others. And then in the public sphere, where a politics of equal recognition has come to play a bigger and bigger role. (Taylor, 1994: 37)

Taylor’s conflation of the dialogical constitution of the self and the cultural is problematic, I think, for two reasons. The first is not so much the assumption that the constitution of the self and the constitution of the cultural is dialogically formed and discursively elaborated. It is rather the implication that there is a comparative ‘centre’ doing the elaboration, or that the elaborating actors work according to the same logic. Autobiography, that most self-conscious expression of the search to mark the traces of significant others that have influenced the writer and hence unify the voice created in the relationships thus marked out, also presumes a constituting self, a self somehow existent prior to its coming into being through dialogue with others. Similarly the constructions of national identity typically require a state and/or organic intellectuals, who are intimate and self-interested players in the political struggle, to unify the population in the name of an authentic and shared cultural ideal. In the process of doing so national identities (linked with states) require, provoke and are consolidated against cultural (or ethnic) others, who become their ‘constitutive outside’, rerouted/rooted by their forced role in the process of the closure of the national identity. Mutually self-determining, national and cultural identities fragment further however according to other struggles over and within the nation state. The construction of cultural identity is then a particularly political process, with no neutral referee to choose a coherent logic between multiple competing narratives, unlike the self-constituting story ordered by the individual.

However this is not to commend Taylor’s distinguishing of the ‘self-imagining’ (autobiographical) individual from the subjects represented as the bearers of cultural identity. For the two are of course the same – Kemalist identity as an outcome of a discursive practice is nothing without the individuals who identify themselves with its rules and possibilities. Nor are those who attach themselves to the discourse named Islamism (which simultaneously revolts against its positioning in the ideological economy of secularism) free to invest such subject positions with their own idiosyncratic meanings. The problem is not in fact the conceptual separation of the domains of the individual and the cultural, but rather how they may better be brought back together. Taylor’s explication of the ‘massive subjective turn in modernity’ (1994: 29), which carries within it the demand of authenticity, of being true to my original way of being, even the notion of life as a ‘quest’, inclines him towards a rather voluntaristic presentation of the agent’s self-constitution through dialogue. (One would not wish to impute the same tasks to a ‘culture’.) This in turn translates to a similar voluntarism...
in the self-production of groups – Taylor is not particularly interested in the actual constitution of racial/cultural/national identities through the exercise of power and exclusion, nor in the forms of discrimination at work in the uneven ability to mark difference. Yet dialogue as an idea assumes partners of relatively equal power.

The second reason follows closely on from this. The selected extracts from Turkey reveal the absolute lack of agreement over the most basic defining features of Turkish identity (and of course one could present more than just secularist and Islamic claims to cultural authority). This being so, we may wonder whether Taylor’s cultural narrative of modernity is guilty of defining the ‘original spiritual vision of [Western] modernity’ (Taylor, 1995: 27) rather too monolithically. Perhaps Taylor’s problem in explaining why this modernity, which offers new possibilities over medieval culture, seems simultaneously unable to realize its own potential, lies here. For if ‘naturalistic’ or atomistic outlooks are as central in the rise of modernity as Taylor’s analysis of its original and progressive vision, culture (and certainly civilizations) as ‘constellations of understandings of persons, nature, society and the good’ (1995: 27) should be understood as internally riven. Taylor indicates as much when he writes of the conflicting ways of imagining the ideal of modern individualism. In valuing an understanding of individualism which allows for consensually founded unions (i.e. a social contract), he censors the alternative that sees individualism as ‘involving a completely self-referential identity’ (1995: 32). Yet both originate in the belly of the culture of modernity, fracturing the fiction of a unitarian ‘vision of the good implicit in Western modernity’ (1995: 30). Internally riven cultures complicate the processes involved in any politics of recognition.

References


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