

Beyond the clash of civilizations: Marcel Gauchet and globalization

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The Western world is currently undergoing a major transformation within but also a transformation in its relationship to other cultural worlds or civilizations. Over five decades, western societies have been experiencing at ever increasing speed the disintegration of hierarchy, from its oldest manifestations, the subjugation of women, the traditional family to the broadening of the notions of equality and rights in the *personal* sphere, most obviously in recent years with respect to gender and sexual identity.

In parallel, the intensification of economic exchange across the planet has fostered recognition of *cultural* diversity and brought it *within* national societies, not least because of unprecedented levels of mobility. Globalization as we have been discussing this phenomenon and the information revolution it has encouraged have of course, impacted not just the Western world. For all human societies now, with the reach of digital communication the outside world is now very much *inside*. States now have to define themselves *in the first instance* with respect to this outside world. This is because of the importance of a new form of global competition that is at first sight economic, scientific, technological but in fact profoundly cultural in character.

This transition from what can be called *societal introversion*, the norm over the course of human history, to *extroversion* is far from painless. It is profoundly destabilizing for both the West and the rest. Within societies, it has triggered reactive culture wars. Between societies, it has produced new geopolitical rivalries and new forms of violence such as Islamic terrorism, phenomena which can all be brought under the umbrella term, “clashes of civilizations”. As we know, this notion of civilizational clash was the central theme of Huntington’s assessment of what would come after the end of the cold war’s bipolar world (Huntington 1996), a world primarily defined by the contest of two *secular* political ideologies that seemed on the surface to be universal in their applicability.

The time has come to interrogate the validity of Huntington's essay, in particular the limitations inherent in the definition of *modernity* it draws upon implicitly. Broadly, these limitations highlight the need to bridge the gap between the disciplines of international relations and historical sociology. They highlight the need to make a new understanding of modernity bear upon the way we can explain the evolution of international relations from the 19th century, in both theory and practice. This new understanding of modernity, firstly, has to be one that accounts for the specific historical circumstances that favoured its appearance in western Europe and fostered a broader western identity incorporating the originally Anglo-Saxon societies of the so-called new world. At the same time though, a new understanding of modernity must account for its capacity to transcend its original geographical and cultural parameters and acquire global resonance.

Such a reassessment of the notion of modernity has in fact been pursued for almost two decades by the so-called school of multiple modernities, a strand of civilizational theory within the broader field of historical sociology that developed from a self-critique of modernization theories in the 1960s (Eisenstadt 2000, 2007). The school of multiple modernities has shown how modernization was in fact never a culturally uniform process but from the start assumed different civilizational forms that combined pre-existing cultural legacies with new values and aspirations borrowed from European and later so-called Western culture.

I would argue that the concept of multiple modernities is useful to transcend the limitations of the Huntingtonian paradigm but I would want to focus on a theory which, although it is not officially affiliated with the school of modernities has profound affinities with it. I refer to the theory of modernity developed by the contemporary French historian and philosopher, Marcel Gauchet (1997, 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2017). This theory is exceptional in its ambitious scope, to account for world history from the birth of imperial states to contemporary globalization. It is clearly inspired by the same self-questioning of European/ Western culture that gave birth to the idea of multiple modernities.

If I were to summarize the value of this questioning of European culture I would say that unlike classical accounts of modernization it does not erase the fundamental ambiguities and tensions inherent in modern Western culture. It rejects the naïve belief in the universal applicability of the European understanding of modernity that characterized the

idea of modernization. Secondly I would add that it does not fall into the opposite trap, that of a wholesale denunciation of western cultural imperialism, sometimes encouraged by post-colonial theory and fostering over-simplistic historical accounts of the cultural transfers associated with the spread of modernity.

Gauchet's work has in fact remained relatively unknown in the English speaking world next to the body of so-called French theory that has been so influential in the Anglo-Saxon word for decades. I am of course referring to standard references in the Humanities: Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze often marked by a pessimistic, self-critical account of European modernity and of the values of the Enlightenment specifically. This French theory which has played a major role in the deconstruction of discrimination, has accompanied the integration in European consciousness of decolonization and has constituted a major source of inspiration for post-colonial theory via the work of Edward Said.

This is not the place to discuss how it rose to such prominence. I must here simply come back to the reasons why I believe Gauchet's work has a lot to contribute to a reassessment of modernity and by extension to an understanding of the significance of contemporary globalization. To my mind it constitutes to date the most significant attempt to grasp the many different aspects of the major upheaval the western world is currently experiencing. According to Gauchet this upheaval is the product of an intensification of modernity, not the outcome of some new condition labelled "post-modernity". For Gauchet (this intensification is in fact a *radicalization* of modernity. Radicalized "hypermodernity" has been reshaping the western world. It has engendered the new ultra-individualistic and technocratic ideology commonly designated as "neo-liberalism". It has also fostered a new "globalist" utopia that has been an obstacle to western societies understanding the full significance of globalization. On a planetary scale, the spread of hypermodernity, in its economic form, has been associated with the appearance of a novel mode of international relations whose full implications still remain to be grasped.

Gauchet has explored the many ramifications of our contemporary hypermodernity in a book published in 2017, *Le Nouveau monde*, the last volume of a tetralogy he wrote over a decade, *L'Avènement de la démocratie* (2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2017). This tetralogy takes up again the question of modernity's European genesis first explored in 1987 in *The Disenchantment of the world* published in English ten years later. *The Disenchantment of the world* established a theoretical framework from which Gauchet has never departed

even if he has refined and revised it over the years and a fundamental hypothesis: modern culture was the product of a new understanding of human power that has developed over thousands of years. The appearance of this new understanding of power was first facilitated by the advent of imperial states in Mesopotamia, then much later, in the High Middle Ages by a totally new form of inward-looking imperialism, associated with the growth of European monarchies (Gauchet 1997). In Western Europe this new form of territoriality established a novel relationship to the land and populations. This fostered the appearance of an economic relationship to the world, also of a new representative understanding of the state and of political sovereignty that lent itself to a rediscovery of the ideal of democracy.

Christianity has played a central role in the formulation of the new form of political legitimacy that underpinned medieval monarchy, one based on the trope of embodiment first analysed by Kantorowicz (1957) but it was not solely responsible for it. This legitimacy combined different “symbolic schemas” inherited from the Germanic notion of magic monarchy and from the Roman empire, as they were relayed by the Catholic church. For Gauchet, and this is very important, the genesis of European modernity was thus the product of a historical contingency that produced cultural cross-fertilization. It was not the outcome of an essential cultural logic derived exclusively from Christianity.

The fact that modernity is defined as a mode of power rather than a set of determinate cultural values or institutional arrangements makes Gauchet’s work transcend the essential limitations of modernity understood as synonymous with modernization and westernization.. Modernity is profoundly cultural because it is grounded in a specific imaginary representation of the natural world and of the place of humanity within it, including a specific future-oriented relationship to time. He calls this imaginary representation *autonomy*. It is synonymous with the reduction of hostility towards otherness, within the human community, the history of the way the insane were treated being a case in point. But it is also synonymous with a reduction of hostility towards other human communities and their cultural values.

Autonomy is the progress of *ontological equality*, which ultimately encouraged the growth of a democratic culture, within European societies. However, this progress of ontological equality also operated in the realm of international relations, even if with a delay, as the history of colonial imperialism demonstrates. It was not until after World War Two and

decolonization that the values of horizontal collaboration won over the imperialistic and hierarchical mindset of European countries.

Gauchet has long argued that in human history, the role played by otherness in the assertion of collective identity has been based on *religiosity*, on the belief in the existence of a supranational order constituting the sole source of meaning provided human communities with their very form and conditioned their dealings with one another. This encouraged him to use the term “religion” in a very specific sense that has actually exposed his work to fundamental misinterpretations. For Gauchet religion designates the mode of social relationships we would normally simply call “tradition”. In his account, tradition, however, only designates a relationship to time and a debt of meaning to the past that favours obedience to inherited customs. It sits alongside other phenomena: *domination* or *hierarchy*, a mode of social relationships predicated on an ontological *inequality* which establishes bonds of mutual interdependence. For Gauchet, religion also involves what he calls *incorporation* which establishes the subservience of individuals to the imperatives of the collective’s cultural self-perpetuation. Finally, “religion” is synonymous with an ideal of universal power, originally conceived as binding the human world to the divine, an ideal which imposes on the state an objective of expansion. In other words, imperialism (Gauchet 2015).

This brings me back to his assessment of the contemporary world of hypermodernity. Gauchet argues that we are witnessing the appearance of a radically new world of human relationships (“*le nouveau monde*”, the title of the final volume of his tetralogy), a world predicated on the fulfilment of the modern mode of human power. Within Western societies, we are witnessing the last manifestations of the process of desacralization and the assertion of the capacity of humanity to shape the world to meet its needs and desires, amplified by a new form of individualism. In globalization, we see a new stage in the *deimperialization* of states that stems from the global acceptance of the nation-state as the fundamental unit regulating both societies from within and their relationships to their counterparts outside the state’s boundaries.

Gauchet’s analysis stresses the radical novelty of the mode of international relations fostered by this deimperialization: it is de-centred as opposed to its earlier phases that were marked by the domination of the West. Deimperialization heralds the advent of a more balanced and peaceful polycentric world, despite the emergence of new civilization

rivalries such as the one between India and China. War is not disappearing but the major wars of the past are being replaced by much more localized conflicts whose potential to escalate seems to be much better contained as a result of the greater global acceptance of the nation-state as political form. At the same time, deimperialization is fostering a new imaginary of common “global” society. But what of human rights abuses? What of democracy? This constitutes perhaps the most controversial aspect of Gauchet’s discussion of globalization.

Globalization is driven by a transfer of economic power but with science and technology, so-called “free-riders” are also transferred: symbolic schemas of freedom, rights, which are slowly challenging the remnants of “religion” in other parts of the world, as the Arab spring demonstrated. Globalization is not the triumph of Western culture. The symbolic free-riders that come with economic modernization will be appropriated and reshaped in the light of non-European cultural legacies and in forms that will perhaps not be immediately understandable to the Western eye,

On the other hand, even if European culture is losing its central role, globalization still involves the universalization of a European invention, the nation-state and of its logic of popular representation. This further empowers the aspirations to freedom and rights.. This is how Gauchet’s view of globalization counters Huntington’s view of a clash of hermetically sealed civilizations and varieties of modernity. With the globalization of modernity there is both a process of universalization and one of differentiation. This universalization is forcing even the most brutal states to pay lip service to that most basic definition of democracy: that states must govern with the consent of populations. This is by no means insignificant. Gauchet acknowledges that the transition to the new world is likely to be chaotic but at the same time he encourages us to remain optimistic over its long term implications.

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