

Book Reviews

Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 215pp. ISBN 0-82233-255-8. £14.50.

Eyal Chowder, *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth: Politics and the Entrapment Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 250pp. ISBN 0-67401-330-1. £32.50.

Max Weber famously talked about the difficulties of maintaining an autonomous existence under the bureaucratized conditions of modern life, and challenged those who would wish to be seen as having a vocation (*Beruf*) to meet the demands of the day. In his own search for the 'sources' of the modern self, Charles Taylor has endeavoured to outline his own vision of what selfhood entails in the modern era, and where it has come from. Both Weber and Taylor too are incredibly interested in the place of religion in modern life, but whereas Weber's account of religion was always primarily historical and tied to questions of the uniqueness of occidental development, Taylor brings to his own writings a deeply suggestive Catholicism, which he uses to counter the claims of an apparently atomistic contemporary liberalism. In his recent book on modern social imaginaries, Taylor attempts to provide a brief genealogy of something like the myths we have come to live by, and the events which he thinks might well come to dominate our sense of community at particular moments; the case of the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales is one of the examples that comes out here. But there is a wider historical vision, as one would both hope and expect, from Taylor's investigation.

The book opens with a discussion of the 'modern moral order' as seen through Grotius and Locke—and although the two are not quite conflated, they do run together. Natural rights discourses are given key analytical purchase for their impact on our understanding modernity itself, and Taylor focuses on Locke especially as a figure that tied consent to property, religion and money, arguing that 'the requirement of original consent, via the halfway house of Locke's consent to taxation, becomes the fully-fledged doctrine of popular sovereignty under which we now live' (p. 5). Today, this has grown in 'extension' and 'intensity' (p. 5). From an initial use in discussions of governmental legitimacy, to a reformulation of God's providence and cosmological order—the idea of secularization, which he does seem to take over somewhat from Weber's schema—Taylor thinks these basic ideas have become more than an intellectual theory, and transformed into a social imaginary.

The natural law 'hermeneutic of legitimation' (p. 7) highlights the fact that the modern moral order as social imaginary travels on another axis, from the hermeneutic to the prescriptive, and on this journey becomes associated with various ideas about the relationship between law and history (e.g., the ancient Constitution

in English discourse), the importance of hierarchy (ranging from Platonic theories of the Forms to theories of correspondence and complementarity (the King's two bodies for example) (pp. 9ff., also p. 16). Such ideas contain 'ontic' components—they are ideas that make claims about their realizability. But,

...the modern idealization of order departs radically from this. It is not just that there is no place for a Platonic-type Form at work: connected to this, whatever distribution of functions a society might develop is deemed contingent; its justification is instrumental and it cannot itself define the good. The basic normative principle is, indeed, that the members of society serve each other's needs, help each other. In this way, they complement each other. But the particular functional differentiation they need to take on to do this most effectively is endowed with no essential worth. It is adventitious and potentially changeable.

Mutual respect and interest make up the new normative order, and it is judged, as is the organization of society, along instrumental grounds (p. 13). This is a secular modification of Locke's account of divine order and providence, tied to the proper use of property; mutual service in Locke's illustration becomes, through reason, an 'economic' calculation (pp. 13ff.).

The triumph of individualism on this reading is actually surprising, as it is a major change from the complementary hierarchies of the previous order. Thus, the original idealization of mutual benefits and rights asserted that 'political society is seen as an instrument for something prepolitical' (p. 19). This is something Taylor sees equally in Hegel, Marx, and Rousseau (p. 20), where instrumentalism engenders a *telos* of mutual benefit. The theory starts from individuals, so that the 'ethic at work here should be defined just as much in terms of this condition of agency as in terms of the demands of the ideal order...[and] that is why consent plays such an important role in the political theories that derive from this ethic' (p. 21). Thus, by a social imaginary Taylor says that

I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (p. 23).

This is different from social theory (which is imaginary), is more than theory (which covers everything), and represents a 'common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (pp. 23, 25). Here Taylor uses the analogy of the map to explain the social imaginary; it is something that allows us to know how to reach our destination, even if we do not recognize everything in detail (p. 26). The realizability or otherwise of the imaginary is important, though, for as Taylor argues, people do not (or will not) demonstrate for the simply 'utopic' (p. 28). Hence, there must be a complex interrelationship between ideas and material factors (p. 31). Thus *pace* Marx's historical materialism (defensible only in Cohen's famous formulation of the Primacy Thesis, says Taylor, which nevertheless in rendering it coherent also makes it implausible), Taylor makes a wider historical

claim about the movement beyond not only 'confessional differences', but also 'what one might call the taming or domestication of the feudal nobility, which went on from the end of the fourteenth and into the sixteenth century' (pp. 32f., also p. 37). In England, this took shape in the Wars of the Roses, with a transformation in the self-understanding of elites—he notes Erasmus, Castiglione, on the civilizing effects of conversation, of manuals for interaction, persuasion and different settings—using something like Elias' theory of the civilizing process to examine the context of 'courtesy', which will later be transformed into the idea of 'civility', the ancestor of 'our "civilization"' (p. 35).

Taylor's etymology of civility, based first in the *polis* (*civitas*), with its links to *politeia*, which go through French transformations of *état police* and in Germany as *Polizei*, does not just refer to the development of state administration though. It has equally a lot to do (as Foucault suggested), with power and administration of the self. This is certainly a key theme taken up by Eyal Chowers' study of the modern 'entrapment imagination', where Foucault's critique of Freud and Weber is outlined and the entrapment of language in the nineteenth century assessed (p. 153). Taylor himself synthetically describes the rise of such an imagination:

So we need to understand the notion of civility not just in the context of the taming of the nobility, but in relation to the much more widespread and ambitious attempts to make over all classes of society through new forms of discipline—economic, military, religious, moral—which are a striking feature of European society from at least the seventeenth century (p. 39).

Civility required discipline, which leads to a discussion of Puritanism in general, and Calvinism in particular, with contrasts being drawn between industry and idleness, economic dependability and character, and where reform and 'improvement came to be seen as a duty for itself'. This explains, he thinks, why, at the Council of Konstanz, brothels were licensed for all the people coming to the town (p. 41).

What we move towards here relates to the development of modern ideas of sociability and civility, and it is the eighteenth-century development of politeness that becomes critical to Taylor's narrative (p. 47), where *le doux commerce* 'was endowed with...power to relegate martial values and the military way of life to a subordinate role, ending their age-old dominance of human culture' (p. 48). This is where Taylor offers something of a *précis* of his account of the sources of the modern self, with disenchantment as a central trope (p. 49), a condition that brought a new order and purpose but also a possible future serfdom. Indeed, 'disenchantment, reform and personal religion went together', constructing a new self-understanding so that individual devotion won out over the collective and 'often cosmos-related rituals of whole societies' (p. 50). Disenchantment is, then, capable of being re-enchanted through personal religious experience. Thus:

What this common human religious capacity is, whether ontically it is to be placed exclusively within the psyches of human beings or whether the psyche must be seen as responding differently to some human-transcending spiritual reality, we can leave unresolved. Whether something like this is an inescapable dimension of human life or humans can eventually put it behind them we can also leave open (although obviously, the present writer has strong hunches on both these issues).