THE FLATTENING OF TIME

Charles Taylor: *Modern Social Imaginaries*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. 215. $18.95, paper.)

Not unlike Taylor's most famous work, *Sources of the Self* (1989), *Modern Social Imaginaries* is magisterial in its scope, having what the author describes, without any visible irony, as the "modest" aim of "sketch[ing] an account of the forms of social imaginary that have underpinned the rise of Western modernity" (p. 2). In other words, Taylor aims in this work to come to a "clearer definition of the self-understandings" that have constituted Western modernity (p. 1), in the hope that we will thereby be sensitized at once to divergent currents within Western modernity, and to the possibility that modernity means something different in non-Western cultures.

The thesis advanced by Taylor, bared down to its essentials, is that starting in the seventeenth century, with the modern natural law theories of Grotius and Locke, a new idea of moral order, that is, a new conception of "how we ought to live together in society," took hold among Europeans and Americans (p. 3). This new idea of moral order involves a kind of "flattening" or "secularization" of time, whereby the notion of human society instantiating or reflecting some "Great Chain of Being," along with the notion of a transhistorical or supernatural legitimation of social order, were set aside. In their place, the contractual model of society—rational exchange among equals for mutual benefit—gradually came to dominate the self-understanding of Western societies.

Of course, the process by which this ousting of premodern, hierarchical self-understandings by more contractual, egalitarian self-understandings occurred is complex. Indeed, most of the book consists of an elaborate account of the historical and conceptual process through which this social transformation took place. Taylor's account of modernity suggests that social change results from a complex and dialectical interaction of persons, ideas, practices, and institutions. Nonetheless, some self-understanding, some sense of who we are and what we are up to, whether explicitly articulated or not, does form the essential background of our social life together.

Rather than use the term *self-understanding*, Taylor opts for the less pedestrian term, "social imaginary." But this is not merely for aesthetic or stylistic reasons: it avoids the connotation of some "theory" about who we are that could be "adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines." A "social imaginary" is "that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have" (p. 25). Our social imaginary, as Taylor uses the term, "incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life" (p. 24).

The modern "social imaginary" emerged thanks to three recent historical developments in particular: the market economy, the public sphere, and the self-governing people. Briefly, the establishment of a market economy in Western societies, while it did not entirely uproot the notion of God's providential plan for man, reconceived that plan in a much more anthropocentric way. The focus of economic theory was not one man's place

in the universe or his relation to his Creator, but on the efficient and partly unwitting interaction of men to their mutual benefit (Smith's invisible hand). As Taylor puts it, "[t]he order here is that of a good engineering design in which efficient causation plays the crucial role" (p. 70).

Secondly, the development of the public sphere (largely along the lines sketched by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*) allowed large populations to conceive of themselves as capable of joint action, within a single social space, lending support to the notion of society as a contract among equals. The modern public sphere also made possible the "secularization" of time, the sense that events are bound together not by an overarching narrative (or narratives) composed of "higher" and lower times, but by sheer "simultaneity."

Finally, the idea of the self-ruling or sovereign people took on ever greater force in the modern era, supported by the market economy and the public sphere. Taylor traces the notion of collective sovereignty both to the Puritan theological innovation of the "covenantal community" of believers and to the subtle translation of traditional, transcendental notions of political legitimacy into a more secular, this-worldly idiom, so that the founding moments of political life were no longer viewed as quasi-divine, time out of mind, events, but rational, "secular" determinations of a public will, which could so act at any time. For example, the ancient and sacred constitutional order of Britain was largely reproduced by the American revolution, except this time, was "put in the mouth of 'We, the people'" (p. 110).

There are few authors who could deal with such an unwieldy topic as "modern social imaginaries" in such a charming and accessible way as Taylor does here. The account is necessarily general and sweeping, yet one does not get the sense that the analysis is simplistic or reductive. On the contrary, it is perhaps one of the most remarkable achievements of this book that it manages to preserve subtlety in its analysis of such a broad and complex topic. A second notable strength of Taylor's analysis is that for all its generality, it remains firmly connected to real historical events and societies, and thus succeeds in giving to abstract ideas such as the social contract a concrete historical meaning. This realistic blending of philosophy and history is something many contemporary philosophers, especially in the liberal tradition, consistently fall short on.

I find myself in broad sympathy with Taylor's analysis, so rather than offering any sweeping criticisms, I will instead highlight a few questions it could have addressed more adequately. The first question is, what if any is the role of God and religion in "modern social imaginaries"? While Taylor avoids the pitfall of a simplistic, godless interpretation of the modern mindset, he seems divided on the way in which a providential God lives on in a largely de-sacralized and egalitarian society. For example, Taylor argues that "[j]ust as in personal life, the dissolution of the enchanted world can be compensated by devotion, a strong sense of the involvement of God in my life, so in the public world, the disappearance of an ontic dependence on something higher can be replaced by a strong presence of God in our political identity...[even for moderns] God can seem the inescapable source for our power to impart order to our lives, both individually and socially" (p. 193). I have difficulty seeing where the distinction lies between an "ontic dependence" of the political order on God and the notion that he is "the inescapable source for our power to impart order to our lives, both individually and socially."

The second question worth asking is whether Taylor is more silent than he needs to be about his own motivation for writing the book and his own assessment of modernity. I am a little ambivalent on this score because I think part of the charm of the book is precisely its succinctness and the self-effacing character of its author. One almost gets the sense that the author (and with him, the reader) is an unwitting witness of the march of history! In many ways, this makes for a disarming and pleasant read. Yet on the other hand, I cannot help suspecting that Taylor's historical narrative is motivated by larger assumptions and interests that are barely mentioned, let alone developed, in the space of this book.

Few have been brave enough to confront the issue of Western modernity at such a general level as Taylor, or if they have, few have managed to be so succinct and explicit about it. I believe this book provides a valuable conceptual clarification of what is distinctive about Western modernity; at the very least, it will spark some valuable reflection on this much discussed yet much misunderstood topic.

—David Thunder

BEYOND THE SELF

Ingrid Creppell: *Toleration and Identity: Foundations in Early Modern Thought.* (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2003. Pp. Xi, 212. $75.00, $22.95, paper.)

Writing about toleration tends to fall into one of several categories: historical accounts trace the development of central concepts and institutional arrangements over time, while more analytic accounts explore the architecture (psychological, political, philosophical) of the concept and the ways it might prove relevant to contemporary life. Within the historical mode, scholars generally either immerse themselves in the sources of particular time periods or focus on several significant thinkers across time. In *Toleration and Identity*, Ingrid Creppell has chosen this latter historical route, offering in-depth considerations of Bodin, Montaigne, Locke, and Defoe as historical thinkers with especially important things to say to twenty-first century audiences. This is an intriguing volume, one that seeks to redirect scholarly attention away from merely institutional attention to the toleration of religious belief and toward larger questions of identity, language, and the nature of the political community.

Toleration and Identity will serve several important purposes for scholars of toleration and early modern thought more generally. Creppell emphasizes the tolerationist potential in such thinkers as Defoe and Bodin, whose centrality to the concept's history has not always been appreciated. Locke and Montaigne are well known members of the tolerationist canon, of course, but they receive intriguing new readings in light of her interest in language and the cultural-psychological dimensions of toleration. Creppell aims to articulate a positive vision and ideal — in which one exists within a situation of difference and yet "stays in a relationship with the person or group with whom one is in conflict"