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Translated from the Czech by Dan Morgan, Trada.

## Martin Škabraha

### Next

Is modernity our antiquity? No, it is not. Or – it shouldn't be.

The relationship between antiquity and ourselves, the contemporary WE, is usually modeled along Renaissance lines as a period of “rebirth” of Greco-Roman civilization, the cradle of science and democracy, after centuries of the “barbaric” Middle Ages. If we were to apply this template to today's situation, it would mean that we stand at the end of another Gothic age, which in this case would clearly be the post-modern era: we have freed ourselves from the shadows of irrationality and relativism once again revealing the classical virtues of progress and emancipation, the order of humanity against the chaos of power; we have overcome the paradigm of space and rediscovered time (eschatological time, time of crisis and hope); modernity would be an almost non-critically accepted model, the well of wisdom, which may be discovered but not deepened.

At the same time (and secondly) the analogy would paradoxically imply that modernity is not only distanced from us temporally but also mentally, it is a world of dilapidated long-abandoned temples and statues, from which the last remnants of offerings and flaking paint have disappeared, leaving only Aryan white marble, onto which we may project our conception of the classical age, those well-balanced features undisturbed by the bloody meat of historical reality. Modernity would be the world of ancient thinkers, many of whom are known only from fragments and the references of others, more from proclamations ascribed to them than their own words.

Is this our relationship to modernity, the age of industry and science, born of enlightenment? Not that modernity does not also exist in the form of ruins and museum artifacts; and not that its authority is

not also frequently acknowledged thanks to fragments and second hand references (which is generally a sign that someone has become an authority). And not that the modern West hasn't been embraced here and there as a perfect model. This last observation in particular seems lacking to me as a means of comprehending the word modernity. The analogy with the Renaissance is somewhat false.

The word modernity traces its origins back to the self-interpretation of medieval Christian culture, disengaging itself with difficulty from the uncritical embrace of the church Fathers and their reading of the Scriptures and hesitantly announcing its claim to its own language of the day, to the innovative cultivation of tradition; antiquity here appears as the general expression for the old and long past (and therefore also proven), which however, the first modernists refused to adopt as the final state of exegesis.

The tradition of the canonical texts presents its readers (or listeners) with its unique historical situation, defined precisely by the need to react to that which already exists, instilling in them their original identity (more as an appeal than a state; identification with a certain duty), which to understand means to recognize the Christian spirit of joyful tidings hidden behind the theological canon, the smashing of which simultaneously opens up space for one's own (authentic) stance towards inheritance; this "destruction of idols", seeking a living, somehow "bare" God behind the slag of his images, is the meaning of modernity, emerging understandably in the polemic reactions of conservatives.

Modernity can never become a pantheon as is, at times, antiquity, since its core is not the sum of specific authors, texts or concepts, but rather a principle – the principle of innovative reading of tradition, the principle of reflection, i.e. of critical consideration of every pillar buttressing our understanding of the world.

Modernity in general means the present, the not-long-ago; modernity is "right now". This of course does not indicate an isolated point, cut off from what was here yesterday – after all the present situation is inseparably tied to the consequences, desired or not, of past actions. When we ask what is modern, we are asking what remains from the world of yesterday, what we need to know from the past to understand the present, what previous decisions have influenced our momentary fate, where lie the beginnings of our WE, what is for us relevant and what should we react to; and we also ask ourselves what kind of yesterday would we like the present day to become from the perspective of tomorrow.

Nonetheless, the analogy between modernity and antiquity as synonyms for the contemporary age and the age of long ago has its merits, even if for another reason: the epoch of novelty has in and of itself begun to reek of oldness. If we understand Western industrial modernity to be the ideological dominance of the principle of innovation, and thus the attitude of a continually changing present, then – paradoxically – some aspect of this lifestyle has merged with feelings of old age, fatigue, and the past. These feelings are sometimes lumped together under the vague label of “post-modern”. “The Rebels wimped out, America is around the corner, If I don’t have it, I order it”, sings the Czech pop group Mňága a Žďorp – in other words: we live in a post-revolutionary age, utopian energy has dissipated into Hollywood kitsch, and everything we desire is within easy reach (understandably for a certain price), because whatever cannot be bought COD is better forgotten. We live on a fixed income, on the old ideas hired to managers of political and economic process.

Are we simply tired from centuries of innovation, from that “creative destruction” as Joseph Schumpeter described the key feature of the capitalist form of production?

Post-modern feelings of old age are in my opinion merely a symptom – not however of fatigue from excessive innovation, but rather a symptom of its lack; a symptom of the suppression of the innovative spirit of modernity, suppression and oblivion of that modernist claim to an original language of the day, of an independent and critical assessment of inherited tradition, which is incompatible with the passive acceptance of unproven authority and rule. True innovation has disappeared and been replaced with a mere letter of it, hiding an even more hardened fixation and domination.

An example is the polemics of Václav Klaus regarding global warming and those who demand the adoption of corresponding political measures. Klaus presumes to defend “freedom” from these people, while in reality he is defending the deregulation of markets and capital, which he identifies with freedom. Except that the rhetoric of deregulation is today merely the rhetoric of a new form of domination, subjugating the unprivileged majority by bringing them into a state of never-ending job uncertainty and permanent preparedness to change living situations according to the whims of the market.

Innovation in such a train of thought includes measures which bring increased productivity or which react to untapped demand. This is all merely the repetition of one and the same template, carried out

according to one and the same social model: everyone on the boat, sailing through stormy waters, abides by the commands of the captains of capitalism. For example, the given public nature of this demand is presumed to be a self-evident source of economic gain (regardless of the secondary effects of the supply created), while potential buyers are calculated as consumers, who will satisfy their needs on the market and who are even willing to cooperate so that supply is tailor-made (participation in market research as a voluntary specification of one's own calculable nature). Everyone from cabin boy to officer respects the ruling regime of discipline and learns "key skills" such as flexibility, assertiveness, rationality, streamlining, positive thinking, and other attributes which do not include any debate over exactly where the ship is heading and why.

The innovative nature of modernity however originally referred to something else: I, standing here and now, thrust into my historical situation and placed before this inheritance of faith which mediates for me but at the same time infinitely distances the mystery of Revelation ("bare" reality), declare in the name of that inheritance both a claim and obligation to choose my own means of engagement, of appropriating this tradition in my own manner; since the words of the Law cannot be understood if we do not hear within the letters of the canon the voice of God – which speaks only to a loving and hearkening heart, not to those who soullessly repeat the words of authority.

On the other hand, authority cannot be avoided. To the contrary it is necessary to struggle against it and thus achieve one's own visage. Authorities are always here, although often indirectly, in the shape of (pre)defined situations into which we are cast, an image of the world in which it is not easy (if at all initially) to differentiate between the depiction and the depicted; we make the world ours at the moment when we are able to perceive, within an image initially considered self-evident, the depiction itself thus placing ourselves on the level of its creators. A person is not a "tabula rasa", is not an unwritten page, but rather an ancient parchment damaged by the ravages of time, for which we must speculate and fill in the missing passages, never mind the difficulties in understanding those which have been preserved; we are not "bare life", which always itches from somewhere below as "unrest in the culture", the presence of that which cannot be portrayed in our images.

I understand modernity as the courage to find a new language, the courage to remake the language of the past into the language of

today, even if we revolt against it as nonsense; modernity is the “age of youth of the world”, in which (to borrow the 1968 perception of Karel Kosík) youth does not merely play the role of *juvenile*, growing into a prepared schematic, but is a troubled *adolescent* which transforms the uniformity of the ruling order. Modernity is the (New Testament) art of translation, it is its “Holy Spirit”, by evaporating of which and by preserving of the given the tradition paradoxically dies away, it is no more communicated. Without free volition and without innovation as an act of adopting the world, contingent upon identifying the depiction in its image, sensitivity is lost for the unavoidable tension between the message which the tradition passes on and the medium, which preserves the message and without which the message would not be accessible, but which also hides and deforms it.

The feelings of decrepitude from which Western culture suffers result from the suppression of this innovative spirit, in which something of the divine sparked, and its replacement by the *fetish* of newness, the capitalist “creative destruction” which requires the mobilization and subjugation of all resources (including human) in the great war for the land of plenty. This fatigue and resignation are not a consequence of excessive action, but a lack thereof, of the establishment of conditions under which nothing can happen; between the lines of official rhetoric of “freedom and democracy” relations of dominance are merely reaffirmed and the key for the creation of images passed to select agencies where, above all, decisions are made about what images will not be shown (even if they could and should be shown).

Post-modernism however was not only a manifestation of this old age, it was also an expression of cultural dissatisfaction, of wincing from bare life, of unportrayable human nature, which always appears to us as that transformative change which protects against the homogenizing hegemony of rule. We can utilize post-modernism as the destructive phase in the criticism of the fetishes left behind by the exegetists of industrial modernity; if the post-modern hangover from the appalling ends of master narratives means that we will never again be able to naturally embrace words such as science, reason, progress, humanity etc., and that we will perceive these words with suspicion demanding thorough consideration before their further use, then the post-modern age will have been a certified continuation of the age of enlightenment, even if it has confronted classicist forms with more of a Baroque esthetic.

Modernity means consciousness of the contemporary. What does this general stance imply in relation to modernity in the specific sense of the Western industrial modern age? It means above all inquiring into what remains a problem in today's (post)industrial civilization, as seen around us primarily in the form of a technological environment. And it means imagination in anticipating the consequences today might have on us and our descendants tomorrow. In doing so it is important to keep in mind that all affairs are ultimately subject to human decisions and in their essence are political, not "expert".

St. Augustine, if I may refer to one of the antique paragons, in his meditations on time recognized the complicated nature of *the present*, the continual transition between what just was but no longer is (and yet in a way persists) and that which is about to happen, but still does not exist (and yet in a way already is): the present is the unified present past and present future. For him as a Christian thinker, each individual here-and-now was caused by the event of epiphany which had already occurred and given tension by anticipated eschatological event endlessly nearing; the first event was the task carried out by each day in response to its inheritance, the second was meant to be the judgment, not revealed until tomorrow, showing whether we acted properly today, and also demarcating the realm of the chosen.

Augustine was also an adherent of the theory of predestination, which did not grant people the possibility to change their fate through their own actions. The only thing that could save a person was divine grace. The word modernity breaks free from this religious context (without being entirely able to stop referring to it) at the moment when faith in grace is definitively broken – or perhaps when it only loses any claim to it; it no longer dares to believe in grace. This moment marks the beginning of what today we understand to be the present age, modernity: we resolved to take our fate into our own hands, to become not only inhabitants of the world, but also its creators – this is the greatest innovation in the history of the Western tradition. We ourselves are arbiters of the chosen and unchosen.

This innovation gave rise to a world from which today we can no longer escape. We have no choice but to return to yesterday and attempt to rectify decisions which will bring fruit tomorrow. The apocalypse, revealing at the end of the story what we have done poorly, does not remain a promise of salvation but rather an imaginative instrument for giving warnings of today's risks (be they environmental, military, or social) with the goal of averting the worst case scenario. It

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is like in the American sci-fi film *Next*, where Nicolas Cage plays a man who is able to foresee the consequences of his decisions and so avoid catastrophe. (The film is of course fairly ridiculous in that the danger the hero is facing is terrorists who want to set off a nuclear bomb in the USA, and to prevent this he sacrifices his private life and enters into the service of the government; while the most probable nuclear “accident” today is an American attack on “terrorist” Iran.)

The ability to envision what will remain here tomorrow from our actions today is the “key skill” for the modernization of modernity. “Science fiction” has become the most needed form of knowledge.