

The Master's Tools: The Infection of Modernity and Hopes for Liberation

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Introduction

The most basic characteristic of western postmodernity appears to be the structuralist questioning of our fundamental state of being. The constant popular references to Michel Foucault's work attest to the desire to stand outside of ourselves. We want to reflect on the core tenets of our thought, and we want to know what premises truly lie at the core of our being, with the hope of reaching a more sincere version of ourselves. This manifests in different ways, from the turning to religious activity or the yearning for spiritual enlightenment. Ultimately, there is a feeling that the world is not as real or true as it should, or could, be. The absurdity of our beliefs and, ultimately, our existence is apparent, but we still hope and search for something 'true'.

This impetus does not rest exclusively in the realm of the West, as modernity is not something that is simply western. As Timothy Mitchell argues, modernity is not geographic but is intellectual and temporal.¹ It exists everywhere that is in contact with the West, as it is ultimately a product of western thought. If anything, it can be defined as a dialogue with a set of political, economic and philosophical ideas, which has been unequal due to historical factors. The spread of modernity therefore represents a mental and physical colonisation, as ideas backed by power grow and transform like a virus. They alter the very DNA of a society.

These ideas are so infused with our ontology that is quite difficult to tease them out. Nonetheless, this will be a fundamental task of this

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¹ Timothy Mitchell, 'The Stage of Modernity', in Timothy Mitchell (ed.), *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 7.

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article. It will not be an exhaustive list, but will provide a working notion with the aim of furthering future discourse on the subject. It will use the term 'modernity' to describe the dialectic network of ideas that comprise modern liberal political thought, the rule of law and bureaucracy, and the modus operandi of commerce and production. Encapsulated in this definition is the concept of individualism, the modern state, and modern economic activity.

The problem with these ideas being part of the dominant, given ideological constellation is that we take them for granted, which represents their true power. They are not 'ideas', so to speak, but rather are simply the way the world is. As such, there is a need to understand them within a methodological framework that takes this into account. To explain the infectious nature of modernity, this article will deploy the social constructivism of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.

Finally, the article will undertake a brief discussion in regard to these structures and spiritual or ontological colonisation. The colonised subject can engage in the act of violence, in the way that the western subject chooses to shoot up public spaces, or blow up government buildings, but these outbursts are ultimately unproductive. All these meaningless acts achieve is the perpetuation of suffering. This article will posit that we must learn to use the aspects of modernity in revolutionary struggles, as it is currently the only avenue open to anyone seeking a different mode of being. We cannot break the horizon, but we can roam within it. This pessimistic conclusion accepts that liberation from metaphysical violence is the ultimate aim, in both the colonial context and on the individual level, but recognises that we must work with what we have. A redefining of the notions of reality must be incremental or, using Heideggerian language, extending of the horizon of being.

The Dominant Dialectic of Modernity

As previously emphasised, the structures of modernity are so hegemonic that, without deep contemplation, they remain unapparent. They operate simply as core principles of the world in which we live. As such, it is necessary to unpack and clarify what is meant by the term 'modernity'. For the purpose of this article, modernity has three fundamental tenets that neatly encapsulate the multitude of sub-categories, but are by no means exhaustive. They are the individual, the state, and the economy. These three facets could also fall under the heading of 'liberalism' but due to the

utilisation of this term for a multitude of different purposes, this article will use 'modernity'. Liberalism is, as a category, fundamentally problematic due to its overlapping and reciprocal relation with modern society.² It is theoretical, political and, cultural all at the same time. Further, even if this article was to simply concern itself with the theoretical formulation, there is the problematic distinction between 'Classical Liberalism' and 'Modern Liberalism'.³ Thus, for the sake of clarity, the term will be placed on the shelf, but its constitutive elements will be of concern under the guise of 'modernity'.

The liberal doctrine of the 'individual' has become a hegemonic discourse, and is fundamentally intertwined with what I mean by the term 'modernity'. By 'individualism', it is meant the primacy of the individual's ability to exert their will and express their identity is a matter of natural right.⁴ Further, it views the individual as "self-creating..." and that "taking responsibility for one's own life..." is one of the highest endeavours.⁵

Bryan Turner clearly communicates the sentiment that this individualism is a fundamental aspect of modern reality. He states that "[t]he doctrines of individualism have been regarded as constitutive, if not of Western culture as such, then at least of contemporary industrial culture..."⁶ Here Turner also recognises the fact that this individualism has broken its initially geographic confines. No longer is it simply a western principle, but with the exportation of the industrialised modes of production, the individual becomes the fundamental input for goods. The individual thus grows in importance as decision-making power shifts away from communal elements and towards an atomised mode of existence. It is the ultimate fulfilment of Locke's assertion that the individual is born into a natural "state of perfect freedom, to order their actions and dispose of their

² Paul Khan, *Putting Liberalism in its Place* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 29.

³ Alan Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 23.

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1859]), p. 62.

⁵ Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism*, p. 36.

⁶ Bryan Turner, 'Orientalism and the Problem of Civil Society in Islam,' in Asaf Hussain, et al. (eds), *Orientalism, Islam, and Islamists* (Brattleboro, VT: Amana Books, 1984), p. 39.

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possessions, and persons as they see fit..."⁷ The most apparent manifestation of the integral role of the 'individual' in modernity is the prevalence and desire for 'civil society'. 'Civil society' is now hailed as a distinct step on the path towards political development, which is prescribed to rogue states that are yet to internalise the principles of modernity.⁸ Thus, individualism is not only an implicit principle but is also widely recognised to be fundamental to the dominant ontological system.

The next logical step is the modern state, which is fundamentally a mode of organising and protecting the individualism described above. It does not necessarily protect the individual as a distinct entity, but rather works to preserve the conception of 'individualism' as it fits with the current paradigm. For if the state truly protected the individual, then there would be less emphasis on property rights as opposed to material equity. The distinction is important in discussions regarding the state following the fall of the Soviet Union.

The definition of the state utilised in this article draws heavily on the work of Wael Hallaq in *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity's Moral Predicament*. In order to propagate his argument regarding the contradiction between the modern state and Islamic law, he clearly lays out some of the core elements that constitute the modern state. His modern state is a historically specific entity, which has arisen from European concepts, that recognises itself as a sovereign will. This apparently sovereign entity has a monopoly over the design and implementation of legislation and legitimate-violence. It utilises bureaucratic principles to organise and preserve itself and plays a hegemonic role in the production of the social order and national identity.⁹

The state is operating best when it undertakes the majority of these steps in a manner that is not consciously recognised. Everyone is well aware that the state has a monopoly over legislation and that it is bureaucratic in nature, but that it organises our social order and is the sole purveyor of 'legitimate-violence' is a little less clear. We like to think of

⁷ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1689]), p. 269.

⁸ Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 202-203.

⁹ Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 19-36.

the state as an extension of ourselves; that our expression of individualism is manifest in the state, and that our culture is a bottom-up phenomenon.¹⁰ Hallaq's definition expresses the operation in more dialectic fashion as opposed to a straight line from citizen to state. By doing so, the definition expresses the historical nature of the state rather than an idealised caricature. Therefore, the definition adequately describes the actual incarnation of the modern state as opposed to a liberal ideal, making it more suitable as a hallmark of modernity.

The third aspect, with which the dominant ontology can be identified, is the modern economic formulation. Economic interactions in modernity amount to the manifestation of individualism and the bureaucratic nature of the state applied to the management of resources, in a dialectic fashion. The concept of the individual was fostered in an environment that also birthed the modern state, while the current formulation of economic life was assisted by the conceptual rise of the two. This interaction becomes apparent when we consider Adam Smith's assertions that he who does best for himself, in turn does what is best for society. Such a formulation has its inception in the moral philosophies and is then spiralled out into theories of commerce.¹¹ Although, to say that one definitively birthed the other, is to accept a rosy and morally neutral formation of the current economic order. It neglects the view that modern modes of production, with the requisite bureaucratic machinery and division of labour, were in fact born out of Caribbean sugar plantations and other enterprises of slavery.¹² Adopting such a perspective removes the modern economic order from its strictly liberal foundations and reformulates it in a less liberating manner. It no longer represents the removal of the peasant from serfdom, but rather it is the atomisation of the individual. It is the reduction of him or her to simply an input of production.

¹⁰ Colin Hay and Michael Lister, 'Introduction: Theories of the State', in Colin Hay and Michael Lister (eds), *The State: Theories and Issues* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 7.

¹¹ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007 [1759]), p. 187; Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976 [1776]), p. 456.

¹² Arthur Stinchcombe, *Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 57-58.

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Thus, the economics of modernity is defined in a somewhat circular interaction with the other two aspects. It represents the atomisation of the individual, or the rise of their labour power as opposed to capital or other economic inputs.¹³ Such a reductive view of the individual's role in this world leads us into a radical redefining of social interaction that results in the "enclaves of precapitalist organization" being destroyed or rendered obsolete.¹⁴ The bureaucratic, or organisational, element is what is needed to achieve such a transition. It is the facilitating force that moves an economy from a barter and trade system of individual production, to the organised economy with a distinct and complex division of labour. This is the unique element that is present first in the slave plantations, then in industrialised Europe, and now wherever the market economy is dominant.¹⁵ Thus, the modern economic structures is a fundamental element of modernity as it not only assists in the manufacturing and maintenance of the 'individual', as the unit of input, but also provides distinct responsibility to the state to protect private property and encourage such commodification.¹⁶

While the above principles are by no means a thorough treatment of the all the aspects of modernity, this discussion does provide certain characteristics that are indisputably foundational to the world we live in. They have become so hegemonic that we are pushed to the limits of our imagination to think of a world without them. The point of this cataloguing is twofold. Firstly, it allows any inquiry to proceed effectively by seeking out specific hallmarks of modernity. These are all aspects that are not essential to human life, even though they may appear to be such. Like Hallaq's state, they are historically specific. Secondly, it is intended to serve as a revealing. It attempts to enforce the idea that the current order is not the highest manifestation of human life, nor is it the only way for the world to be. Regardless, these are the aspects that allow us to identify the presence of 'modernity'.

¹³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Classics 1992 [1867]), pp. 270-271.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 36.

¹⁵ Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), pp. 46-52.

¹⁶ Ellen Wood, *Empire of Capital* (London: Verso Books, 2003), p. 11.

The Systems of Reality

As previously stated, the above aspects have attained the status of metaphysical truth. They are utterly taken for granted simply as the way that humanity exists. Utilising the language of Martin Heidegger, modernity continues the western historical forgetting of the ontological difference. We see the modern world as being transcendent of the physical reality. It is infinite in its reflection of the fundamental nature of humanity, rather than one possible manifestation of social interaction. Such a perspective on reality requires a specific sociological framework to adequately understand how we arrived at this point. Thus, this section will provide a brief overview of the social constructivism of Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger.

The starting point of the system lies in humanity's predisposition to sociability, or the manufacturing of complex social networks. Berger and Luckmann conclude that humanity does not exist in a world that is absolutely given, as do many of our biological compatriots in the animal kingdom.¹⁷ Rather, our particular 'human self' is developed as a direct relation to our social environment. The birth of complex social ordering principles follows with the development of 'habitualisation'. According to Berger and Luckmann, by narrowing the scope of choices, humanity is able to relieve "the accumulation of tensions that result from undirected drives."¹⁸ We are able to settle down and exist in a world that does not require consistent decision-making through the development of new processes for every task. For this system to come into being, it is necessary for a collective to develop a system of objectification of individual experiences.¹⁹ Language is the most obvious of such systems, as it acts as both a communicator and a store of knowledge.²⁰ This system of communication allows the system to be born, and additions to be made to it. Thus, the system of habitualisation becomes codified into language, and reality and language become entangled.²¹ This system progresses to the stage

¹⁷ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 47.

¹⁸ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 53.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1967]), p. 29.

²⁰ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 68; Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971 [1959]), p. 63.

²¹ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 26.

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of 'institutionalisation' as individuals within a collective come to recognise the habitualisation as ontology rather than just a mode of being.²²

These systems then need to be perpetuated through modes of legitimation. Berger and Luckmann identify four forms of legitimation, which reach their culmination in 'systematic explanations' for understanding the world. Each level of explanation thus builds upon itself until we have a 'symbolic universe'. Not only does our knowledge justify the social operation of the world, it provides us with reasons for reality's *modus operandi*.²³ In other words, the symbolic universe represents a "theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality..." and its establishment is necessary in order to have "the institutional order... be taken for granted in its totality as a meaningful whole."²⁴ This form of legitimation comes about due to a "process of subjective reflection, which, upon social objectivation, lead to the establishment of explicit links between the significant themes that have their roots in the several institutions."²⁵ Systems of knowledge become self-enforcing as they attain the status of 'symbolic universe'.

The ultimate aim of the symbolic universe is to make the operation of reality seamless. People play their roles, institutions operate as they should, and we all continue to exist in our recognised social reality. In a society that is perfectly functioning, or, in other words, a society where every individual is perfectly socialised, the primary symbolic universe will be continuously perpetuated as it has reached the status of objective reality. This perfect socialisation is inevitably untenable as micro-social universes can always attain a sufficient level of deconstruction as to cause the primary reality to become problematic.²⁶ As such, theoretical systems of universe-maintenance are necessary to protect the primary symbolic universe.²⁷

These 'conceptual machineries' consist of detailed theoretical systems, which act to further legitimate already integrated institutions.²⁸ In other words, they provide reasons for why certain institutions sit together and, therefore, constitute a symbolic universe. This is what we experience today with the facets of modernity discussed above. Political scientists assert that the modern

²² Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 54.

²³ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 95.

²⁴ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, pp. 95, 104.

²⁵ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 104.

²⁶ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, pp. 106, 127.

²⁷ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 107.

²⁸ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 110.

state is a transcendent concept, and is essential to reality. Liberal philosophers assert that the individual is the elementary unit of human interaction; and economists assert that there has always been a market. As well socialised individuals, we struggle to move past these assertions. Thus, as long as an individual remains adequately socialised, meaning they have objectified the symbolic universe, the conceptual machinery of their particular reality will suffice in explaining the institutional order in question.

The above methodological description does not claim to be the definitive account of reality. Rather, it is simply a well-elaborated sociology of knowledge. It provides a system that allows us to adequately explain and understand the underlying structural elements of modernity. Furthermore, it provides detailed frameworks for understanding the colonial domination of a specific ontology over another. Power asserts what is the dominant conceptual machinery, and what is to be relegated to the scrap heap of history.

Modernity, the Colonial Subject, and Hopes for Liberation

Utilising the above frameworks, it is possible to classify the current state of 'globalisation' as a state of reality where aspects of modernity have attained the status of the dominant conceptual machinery. They have organised themselves using the rigour of the scientific method, and have been backed by the material force of Western Europe, to become dominant paradigms for existence. Timothy Mitchell's *Colonising Egypt* provides an excellent insight into the implementation of this material force in the ontological conquest of others. Mitchell's juxtaposition of the material supremacy of the British in 1882, by providing detailed accounts of the destruction wrought on Alexandria, with the development of a 'modern' political culture centred around the tenets described above, provides an excellent example of the way in which ideas and conquest are supported by each other.²⁹ The material prestige of the British supports the development of the conceptual machinery of modernity, and also provides a concrete example of why such an ontology should be dominant. The rise and domination of modernity is linked to its material backing, which in turn is a product of chance and necessity.³⁰

This, ultimately, is the crux of 'colonised thought'. A person or society, as the two are fundamentally entangled, is colonised when the aspects of modernity have become wholly self-evident and the conceptual

²⁹ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 129-133.

³⁰ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), pp. 405-408.

machinery in question appears to be the only mode of existence. Keeping with the Arab world, the explosion of print media in the late nineteenth century is an example of this process taking hold. The engagement with European material superiority, and the entanglement with its supporting conceptual machinery, leads to question featured in *Al-Muqtataf*, “what are the causes of Eastern backwardness and our weakness in the modern sciences in comparison with the West?” The responses to such questions by the editors refer to the need to embrace science, education, and the facilitation of individual growth.³¹ Similar responses are heard from all of those that are recognised to be great voices of reform in the Arab world, including Al-Afghani, and Fazlur Rahman.³² Ultimately, the colonisation of spirit proceeded due to its undeniable nature. The West is more powerful, we need to understand why, and we must become like them.

This colonisation of spirit is a product of the historical period of physical colonisation. It logically follows that the period of decolonisation would represent an equal and opposite process, but this evidently did not materialise. The tenets of modernity that were defined in the colonial engagement were backed with such an unequal force that it was almost impossible to undo this kind of conquest, especially since it had become so entrenched in the dominant, western European world order.³³ Thus post-colonial thought has struggled with this contradiction, as it is essentially inescapable.

Frantz Fanon, a towering figure of post-colonial thought, encapsulates the urge to escape spiritual colonisation and the ultimate futility of such attempts. He recognises that the colonised subject is trapped in the realm of “non-being” where their very legitimacy of existence is denied. He states that the subject has “settled into a universe from which we have to extricate them.”³⁴ The irony is that the extrication, which Fanon seeks, is impossible. Fanon is the quintessential example of why this is the case. Throughout his life he is in constant struggle with his identity. He feels that he is French; he identifies with the intellectual pursuits going on

³¹ Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), pp. 92-94.

³² Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, “Lecture on Teaching and Learning *and* Answer to Renan”, in Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Modernist Islam 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 103-110.

³³ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin, 2015), p. 4.

³⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008 [1952]), p. xii.

in the metropole, yet he is rejected by this society.³⁵ The contradiction is within him. It is part of his very constitution. Such an analogy can be spiralled out to the analysis of the post-colonial state. There is a longing to break away from an order that has oppressed and denigrated the colonial subject to the realm of non-being, but the contradiction runs deep to the very form of being that the state encapsulates. The state is the “colonized intellectual” whose interests are “identical to those of the colonialist bourgeoisie...” It does not seek the radical overturning, but merely represents the new dominant party.³⁶ It is the representative of modernity, who has individualism and economic order in its very constitution.

What is the answer for a colonised people, longing for total revolution, when the accepted reality is a constant impediment on the expression of any ontology that does not conform with the order of the world? Unfortunately, there is yet to be an example to point to where this has been successful. De-colonised countries have either fallen into line in the world order, such as in Latin America, engaged in violent struggles between ontological assertions, or become entangled in pseudo-independent formulations that are simply expressions of the dominant order, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Ideally, the ontology of interpretation would become a paradigm for existence where reality takes on less metaphysical edges.³⁷ This is not practical, or realistic, as much as it is ideal. The answer therefore lies in the harnessing of the forces of modernity. If the oppressed cannot escape it, it must be utilised towards the cause of physical liberation, if spiritual is out of our grasps for the moment. The article thus provides an unsatisfactory answer to the question of true liberation. There is no direct path to reaching it at the moment, globalisation has made certain of that. Communities cannot retreat from the conceptual machinery as it, aided by technology, has become entrenched within existence.

³⁵ Lewis Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to his Life and Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 24-29.

³⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1963]), p. 23.

³⁷ Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 94-95.

Conclusion: An Unsatisfactory Answer to an Optimistic Question

This article sought to lay the foundations for further discussions regarding the dominant conceptual machinery of modernity, and what I have referred to as 'spiritual colonisation'. It outlined what I consider to be three fundamental tenets of modernity, which can be identified in all modes of existence that are accepted by the dominant ontology. The social constructivism of Berger and Luckmann provides the sociological mechanism by which these tenets came to be dominant. The final section seeks to begin a discussion in regard to the relation between the dominant ontology, and the colonial subject. The article thus provides an object to point to when we discuss colonised thought. It provides a structure to this 'spiritual colonisation'.

Such an undertaking must be foundational to discussions of 'authenticity' and liberation in post-colonial struggles. These struggles continue to be of relevance even in a time when de-colonisation proper has come and gone. The new struggles are within societies. These struggles are now undertaken by those who are marginalised from the material gains that modernity provides, but are bound by its core tenets nonetheless. They are struggles for an authentic existence that may well ultimately not bare fruit. There is the option of accepting wholly the premises of reality, and being accepted by them, or living in the twilight.

Priorities must ultimately be ordered. Do the oppressed prefer to continue to struggle for a 'genuine' liberation, the kind of which is potentially unattainable anyway, or would they be content with the ability to self-administer within the currently defined paradigm? Neither is ideal. The metaphysical boundaries appear to be impenetrable, and the tenets of modernity appear to be concrete, at least for the moment. Thus, we return to the discussion of post-modernity at the beginning of the exercise. If we cannot reach an ontology of dialogue, where the ontological difference is recognised, then what options are there for any true liberation? That is a question that will continue to play out within the struggles that appear to be becoming more and more frequent.