

Reconciling Modernity and Environmentalism: A Futile Yet Beautiful Effort

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Abstract

The ultimate beauty in the contemporary pursuit of the ecological transition lies not within finding a harmonious balance between social, economic and environmental objectives, but within the collective self-reflection urged by this existential threat. This study, thus, wishes to contribute to the exploration of the relationship between humans and their surroundings by investigating whether modernity and environmentalism are compatible. As it is out of the scope of this paper to discuss all possible combinations of the two given the rich theoretical frameworks that have been established, this study limits itself to the following assumptions. First of all, modernity and environmentalism are only viewed at a collective level (group of people with the same political representative and subscribed to the same political ideology) to put it differently. Secondly, I consider environmentalism as a mode of living that can be continued forever given all other factors being constant. Lastly, this study attributes two different temporalities to the notion of modernity; retrospective and contemporary. With these assumptions in mind, I argue that modernity and environmentalism are not compatible in either of the cases.

Keywords

Reconciling Modernity; Environmentalism; Contemporary Modernity.

1. Modernity on a Timeline

This term has to be taken with great caution as it is both a temporal—thus historical, and political construct (Sweeney, 2021) [1]. Linguistically speaking modernity is a word that we use to distinguish the present from the remote past. However, given that the present moment is essentially ephemeral, when one utters the word “modern”, it is essentially to demarcate a separation between the recent past to which we still feel related and a remote past that we are estranged from, or between the near future that we believe to be similar to the recent past and the remote past. Thus, any talk about modernity is intrinsically a narrative about history, an attempt to rationalise the past by dissecting it into periods, and a compare and contrast based on a deliberate construction of history. As a result, modernity only exists as a concept when there is a reference point against which one can start compartmentalising the flow of time by attaching labels to different sectors of history. Borrowing the encompassing definition of modernity that Beck provided—change in societal characteristics, production technology and organisation, mode of living, interpersonal relationship, to name a few—one sees the arbitrariness of modernity, and most importantly, that this turning point marked by changes is fluid (Beck, Lash, & Wynne, 1992: 50). [2]

However, it is possible to put aside this post-rationalisation of history and grasp the notion of modernity from a contemporary perspective. And in fact, this contemporary approach has been used widely throughout history. Thus, there are two conditions attached to the applicability of this modernity. First, there shall be at least two different political units at the same historical moment. Second, one unit shall, for whatever reasons, have the desire to project the presence

of the other unit to its future. What remains constant between contemporary modernity and retrospective modernity is the same underlying implication of comparison. But in this second case, we do not compare with our own past but we compare with what is happening elsewhere at the present.

In sum, *retrospective modernity* is established when one marks a point in the course of history which flows towards them; whilst *contemporary modernity* consists of two different streams of current, and one wishes to flow in the same way (volume, speed, direction) as the other in the near future.

2. Retrospective Modernity

Great thinkers have established various references to draw the line between the modern and the remote past. Durkheim, for example, addressed this shift by pointing out the social transformation from “mechanical solidarity” to “organic solidarity” (Mouzakitis, 2017: 6)[3].

Latour argues that we would only be modern if we perceive our surroundings and various disciplines in a specific way (Latour, 2012: 11) [4]. By associating the widely accepted understanding of modernity—intellectual achievement evolving from and enabled by the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment—, with Benjamin’s special take on the mind-environment feedback loop, Akkerman examines modernity through the interaction between minds and the built environment which stretches far enough to include climate and crowds of people (Akkerman, 2019). [5]

This text, however, sets the historical cleavage a bit further in time—right about the beginning of the domestication of animals and plants. Latour argues that the severity and the omnipresence of the climate crisis can be vividly felt through the gradual realisation that we shall soon have nowhere to land (Latour, 2018: 9-10) [6]. However, destabilising this detachment could sound like it is in the first quarter of the 21st century, it was not a concept unfamiliar to history. And, even though this detachment from land is a devastating consequence of our unsustainable way of living on this planet, it is also a great opportunity for mankind as it might bring back the peaceful coexistence we once had with our surroundings.

It was not crystal clear what led to the first ecological transition—from hunter and gatherer to agriculture, as in the beginning farming was neither more productive nor less physically demanding (Dobson, 2016: 7; Tuan, 2013: 68).[7], [8] Nonetheless, this new relationship towards land laid the foundation for two important features of human society which are still very visible today. **First of all**, agriculture is, like many other modes of production that came after, unsustainable. Even though today’s calculation might tell us that the amount of available land back then should have been sufficient to feed all population in absolute terms 100,000 years ago, evidence of crop rotation and the later use of fertiliser speak of the cruel fact that the land, by itself, cannot give what our ancestors needed (Dobson, 2016: 8).

Second, this attachment to land has changed what we mean by “need”. Agriculture not only provides an immediate satisfaction to current needs, but it also allows for a reasonable expectation for future satisfaction—given its relative predictability in comparison to hunting. The pursuit of needs in these two different temporalities has been famously noted by Hobbes—together with what he termed as equality, scarcity and uncertainty—as an explanation for human’s constant desire for not only power but more power. Thus, the concepts of abundance and scarcity should be understood in a relative sense as there have always been enough resources for everyone to survive. Therefore, the obsession with wealth accumulation was not an outcome of industrial capitalism starting 18th century onwards.

Furthermore, one wonders to what extent can the contemporary critique of the mass consumption societies benefit from Hobbes’s explanation of self-defence.

If the fundamental conflicts between modernity and sustainability lie not within any specific mode of production, but within the attachment we have to properties, then the cure is conceivable. As Rousseau has suggested in his description of the *savage man*, if we all individually live a life with detachment from land, similar to hunter and gatherer, it is theoretically conceivable to have the “state of nature”. This is an inspiring argument as all environmental problems are essentially triggered by political problems. Yet there is no need to follow strictly what Rousseau depicted as solitude as it also implies a separation from other people. Thus, what we can reasonably consider is a rational detachment from the land. First, through revisions of property rights and cultural construct, we might be able to influence the current social-material entity of land—a modern characteristic of land noted in the text *What is Land?* (Li, 2014: 600) [9] Second, one might push for detachment with reinforced mobility. Among the newly proposed redefinition of Roosevelt’s Four freedoms in response to the climate crisis, the demand for the freedom to move is particularly inspiring (Aronoff, et al., 2019) [10]. Yet, in light of what has been argued above, this argument should be pushed further that full mobility is not only an option but what will enable the detachment from the land.

3. Contemporary Modernity

In the second half of the 19th c, the Meiji Restoration was a political, social and military reform aiming at modernising Japan after the European imperial model. A little before, Napoleon III wished to modernise Paris after London. It would be unreasonable to frame these modernising efforts as a decision based on retrospective thinking. Rather, they looked at contemporary models and projected those models onto the portraits of their own future. Thus, even though this contemporary modernisation has an aspect concerning the future, it is far from being futuristic as long as all imaginations are rooted in the already realised present. To put it differently, one can think of living on Mars—one of our fantasies of the future—as a counterexample. It is conceivable to agree with the fact that hardly anyone in the first quarter of the 21st century would think of it as modern. Simply because it has not been realised yet.

After WW2, this pursuit of modernity based on horizontal comparison was often no longer a voluntary act but was imposed by first-world countries on countries that fall out of this privileged category. Partially urged by the political competition during the cold war, western society suggested an idea of modernization to be followed—which often included a democratic political regime, free market, welfare state and freedom of speech, to name a few (Bhambra 2014: 21). [11] To scale it down, everyday examples of a desirable modern life can be: having drinkable water from every single tap, having a pay rise every year, or direct democracy, etc... However, looking back at what was claimed at that time, it is clear that the discourse of modernity has been nothing more than a narrative. A simple example would be that it was not until the Civil Rights Act of 1968 that one can no longer explicitly discriminate against people of colour with legal and administrative support in the United States [12]. Thus, the pathway of western modernity is a mere painting of the best scenario possible in the world which, admittedly, is far away from any sort of heaven.

However, this imperfection was overshadowed by the strong emphasis on economic growth—an important factor in this western theory of modernization whose popularity escalated after WW2. An important factor behind its predominance is that it became measurable with the emergence of the calculation of GDP (Schmelzer, 2017) [13]. This measurement could have always been a neutral statistical summary if it has never been widely used to categorise countries in a dismissive way. According to the UN categorization of countries, GDP is one of the criteria used to differentiate between developed economies, developing economies, and least developed economies, to name a few. It is hard to deny that these naming are not condescending as they ostensibly imply that being developed is the ultimate objective. Michael

Parenti has famously pointed out the irony behind those arrogant terms by saying: "These countries aren't underdeveloped, they are overexploited" Nonetheless, today, when talking about modernity in the present, especially from a formal colonial and third-world country perspective, one does not think about progress, growth, social changes in an absolute way. Rather, it is a compelled chasing after what is deemed to be good, powerful, and desirable—the western society.

Nonetheless, if to be modern means to be like the west and the ultimate goal is to align modernity with environmentalism, we just have to make sure the west is or will become a good role model. Sadly, it is not the case yet and it might not be the case any time soon for two reasons. First, although the west has a global understanding of ecological transition, it doesn't have the capacity, rights or *willingness* to have those visions realised globally. In 2012, the movement "Made in France " started to gain ground after a high unemployment rate. Francois Holland called for 'industrial patriotism' to revive the French industry and boost the local economy. Later this movement was said to be also contributing to the transition towards a lower carbon consumption mode. However, there was little discourse after this urging a reduction in exports from France to elsewhere for environmental reasons. Thus, all efforts toward ecological transition are currently based on the premise that the local economy will not be compromised in absolute terms. Furthermore, it is not a secret that certain global inequality has to be kept, if not enlarged, in order to maintain economic growth while masking the uncomfortable yet undeniable conflict between growth (the desire for more) and sustainability. This green-washing of the western capitalistic economy is demanded not only by political correctness attached to this existential crisis, but also by the moral comfort needed by the public.

Second, the west is constantly imposing higher and higher standards for modernity. For instance, Global North has a privileged understanding of water poverty. It is said that cities are expected to provide "resources (...) at affordable costs to meet the comfort of residents." (Yoon, Sauri & Domene, 2019: 177) [14] Thus, Barcelona, intending to provide comfort, urgently calls for interventions as its average water consumption per person was 103.5 litres in 2016— a figure relatively low compared to other European Cities but higher than the WHO standard (between 50-70 litre) (WHO, 2013) [15]. Thus, it is hard to not believe that this new poverty standard based on contentiously determined comfort will not unleash itself into a vicious cycle of craving for more. Rousseau addressed this unquenchable desire as a result of productivity gained through cooperation and tool-making along with human history.

Although our ancestors have long been freed from working ceaselessly for basic needs, they have become corrupted by leisure as minds started to wonder beyond survival (Wolff, 2015: 28) [16].

Nonetheless, one can argue that chasing after shall be rewarded the day the western society achieves sustainable growth or durable capitalism. Yet, it is meaningless to consider any future possible success in a discussion of modernity which is solely anchored in the present.

4. Conclusion

Climate change is a wicked problem in the sense that we often focus on finding an external force to solve the problem, such as taxation, international treaties, and new technologies. (Head, 2022: 57) In a way, environmental problems all stem from political problems, for if we all live like the savage man in Rousseau's text, there shall not be any environmental problems as there is not any political relationship between individuals. What has remained constant since the dawn of agriculture is the political nature of all our problems. Modernity, as argued in this study, is sheltered under the big umbrella of politics. Then, it is fundamentally meaningless to reconcile two concepts both issued from the political nature. They cannot survive without each other.

However, we are tempted to think that political solutions will be the magic powder without being willing to admit the fact that we will never be saved by a new political regime, nor by a new political party, nor by any green policies. Instead, the true core of the problem lies within the discussion of why political relationships exist between human beings. And for that, we have to address human nature in order to pull out the rotten tooth.

Unfortunately, it is not only far beyond the capacity of this study but also beyond all mundane minds to determine what human nature is, how we can change human nature, and whether it is desirable to have an alternative human nature. If I were to suggest any possible solution, I would place my faith in spirituality, not because I am driven by any loyalty to the mighty God, but because humans are morally weak. In light of this intellectual, and moral, limitation in conducting a full investigation of the wicked environmental problem, the fine balance between social, economic and environmental objectives shall always be the unreachable star in the sky. Yet the restless chasing for the star is what shall render our self- destruction beautiful and our existence human.

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