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Modernity and Tradition – a False Confrontation?

Abstract. This article examines the confrontation between Russia and the West, often framed as a struggle between Modernity and Tradition. This perspective, however, risks ceding the monopoly on Modernity to the West while leaving us with an outdated understanding of modern values. In the absence of a clearly articulated concept of Modernity, this disorientation poses a significant ideological challenge. The article argues that this challenge stems from a rigid theoretical dichotomy between Modernity and Tradition. A more productive approach would be to view Modernity as a continuously evolving space of alternatives. This space emerges from the clash between socio-political entities – such as cities, states, classes, science, and religion – and various archaic communities that adapt to, resist, or evade the pressures of civilization. The study reveals that there are no substantial premises for a strict opposition between Modernity and Tradition. Modernity cannot be reduced solely to high modernism or the despotism of rationality and civilization; it inherently involves elements of Tradition at each historical juncture. Conversely, what is typically termed “tradition” cannot exist independently of its connection to high modernism. Together, they shape our current understanding of Modernity.

Keywords: alternative; high modernism; despotism; Modernity; progress; tradition; civilization

The confrontation between Russia and the West is often interpreted as a clash between Modernity and tradition – between modern societies, where tradition has become a memory, and a society still largely traditional. This trend is evident both in the works of Russian scholars, such as Kara-Murza (Kara-Murza 2004), some of whom are informally seen as near-official ideolo-

gists¹, and in the rhetoric of the country's top state officials. Many of Russia's and the Soviet Union's undeniable achievements are clearly tied to Modernity, while tradition supposedly plays a much smaller role in these achievements and is viewed with certain reservations. On closer examination, what is called tradition isn't exactly tradition, at least not the heritage of a so-called "traditional society": "Traditional values include life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, patriotism, citizenship, service to the Motherland and responsibility for its fate, high moral ideals, a strong family, creative work, the priority of the spiritual over the material, humanism, mercy, justice, collectivism, mutual assistance and respect, historical memory and generational continuity, the unity of the peoples of Russia"².

Despite official rhetoric strongly emphasizing tradition and condemning various modern trends (for instance, the Russian Orthodox Church criticizing humanism), we end up conceding Modernity to the West, allowing it to claim a monopoly on it. Meanwhile, we hold onto an outdated version of modern values – calling ourselves "true Europe"³ – which we mistakenly label as traditional. Without a clear understanding of the essence of Modernity, this approach becomes confusing and ultimately fails as an ideological strategy.

Both of the above-mentioned ideological strategies stem from an inadequate understanding of what Modernity actually is. In this view, Modernity is reduced, on the one hand, to "high modernism", and on the other, to individualism and its resulting self-destructive tendencies. This fragmented Modernity is contrasted with an abstract tradition that traces back to a schematic, ideal-typical traditional society. The latter is portrayed as almost unchanging and based on certain "eternal values". Those who use

¹ Chernov A. *Alexander Dugin spoke about traditional values in Russia. Dugin: Western civilization denies all traditional values*, 20 September 2023, available at: <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2023/09/20/21327355.shtml> (accessed October 12, 2024). (in Russ.).

² *Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 809 dated November 9, 2022, "On the Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values"*, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/48502> (accessed October 12, 2024). (in Russ.).

³ Karaeva E. *The real Europe has found refuge in Russia*, *RIA Novosti*, July 2, 2022, available at: <https://ria.ru/20220702/evropa-1799708503.html> (accessed October 12, 2024). (in Russ.).

such rhetoric are not bothered by the fact that when they attempt to define these values, the result is either blatant pseudo-esotericism (as seen among the so-called Western traditionalists (see: Sedgwick 2023) and their Russian followers) or something unmistakably modern, as found among contemporary Western right-wing movements and our official patriots. Clearly, these two aspects are difficult to reconcile in narrative terms, and in the political sphere, only one can be prioritized at the expense of the other, which prevents social consensus, intensifies conflict, and makes the resolution of both internal and external political crises difficult.

A more productive approach, in my view, is to consider Modernity primarily as a continuously reproducing space of alternatives. Within this space, “one can observe the simultaneous coexistence and overlay of reciprocal (gift-exchange, familial, clan) relationships, distributive and market relations in different spheres of life, as well as the gradual long-term historical shift in the balance of these relations in favor of the latter” (Martyanov 2022: 49). The space of alternatives in Modernity historically emerges from the clash of socio-political subjects, born from the products of “civilization” (the city, the state, classes, estates, science, religion, etc.) and “communities”, archaic collectives of various kinds that partly adapt to the pressures of civilization and partly resist or evade it. As J. Scott notes, in the civilizational discourse from which “high modernism” largely derives, the state and its practices, no matter how repressive and despotic they may be, are considered to be on the right side of history – on the side of progress. In relation to non-state ways of life, they appear advanced and developed. Moreover, they often thrive at the expense of the non-state periphery, extracting various resources from it, primarily potential subjects: slaves or more or less coerced migrants. The non-state periphery is brought into progress and civilization through exchange or slavery (Scott 2017: 21). “Its permanence is all the more remarkable in the light of evidence that ought to have shaken it to its very foundations. It survives despite our awareness that people have been moving, *for millennia, back and forth across this semipermeable membrane between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘uncivilized’ or the ‘not-yet-civilized’* (italics mine. – L. Fishman). It survives despite the perennial existence of societies that occupy an intermediate position socially and culturally between the two presumed spheres” (Scott 2017: 153).

Therefore, if the practice of civilization coincides with the practice of despotism, then the discourse on civilization initially draws attention to this fact. In Europe, this was well understood during the era of Enlightenment. From the perspective of Rousseau, Mably, and several other Enlightenment figures, civilization and progress in human history go hand in hand with despotism and moral corruption. This perspective is just as valid as the optimistic providentialism of Condorcet, which laid the groundwork for the “religion of progress”. It’s the same aspect of the “dialectic of Enlightenment” that Adorno and Horkheimer discussed, linking it to fascism – the trajectory of civilization and progress that leads “from Kant to Krupp” and to “reactionary modernism”. Understood this way, Modernity comes down to the “social logic of generality”, as Reckwitz puts it, which requires “standardization, formalization and generalization of all entities of society”, engages in the “universal generalization” and represents a “process of formal rationalization” that creates “large-scale complexes of predictable rules” (Reckwitz 2022: 23-24). The high modernism that underlies these complexes of rules and strategies is, to a large extent, the “discourse of civilization” – “rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format” (Scott 2005: 19). “The social simplifications thus introduced, J. Scott argues, not only permitted a more finely tuned system of taxation and conscription but also greatly enhanced state capacity” (Scott 2005: 19).

Consequently, high modernism reflects not so much a desire for freedom and individualism but rather an aspiration for progress and order. It often emerges as a despotic, state-driven, and centralizing alternative to the community, which imposes its own equally coercive social order on individuals. The practices and narratives that describe and legitimize this newly formed state of alternatives become the foundation for what is called freedom. The romantic revolutionary protest of the individual against progress, rationality, and order – drawing, among other things, on an idealized vision of the past – is part of Modernity that cannot be reduced to high modernism and the discourse on civilization. Importantly, early bourgeois revolutions were driven by religious fervor and legitimized through references to the truly Christian lives of previous generations, which were fundamentalist in spirit. In a secularized form, the return to true righteousness is replaced by the renewal of the broken

ancient social contract, a return to nature, in short, a return to traditional values trampled by despotism. In the romantic apologia for revolution of the early modern period, a significant role is played by the appeal to the revitalizing power of “barbarism”, which is meant to establish a realm of freedom and justice. This power stands in opposition to the barren rationalism of the classical period, which is more closely associated with despotism. In other words, revolution is a means to reproduce alternativity, so constitutive of Modernity. This alternativity must always be present or at least simulated as imminent but postponed revolution.

The space of alternatives created in this way serves multiple purposes. It becomes the foundation for the emergence of tradition, understood as a set of practices that offer an alternative to the despotism of civilization and progress, though these practices can be equally despotic. It also acts as a prerequisite for the establishment of freedom and individualism, allowing people to choose between different forms of despotism and creating conditions for development and progress. Additionally, it provides a starting point for political, philosophical, and religious discussions that aim to address the “moral collapse” associated with capitalism and Modernity (Martyanov, Fishman 2012) and to conceptualize these alternatives from various perspectives.

In other words, civilization, being understood in a broad sense as a combination of progress and calculative coercion along with tradition, creates a space of alternatives and freedom that constitutes Modernity. Ultimately, Modernity is a collection of attitudes, values, and institutions that have emerged from a situation of expanding choice – fundamental alternatives. A person of the modern era is a Kantian enlightened individual who has the capacity to take advantage of the availability of alternatives, because he managed to emerge “from his self-imposed immaturity” and to learn “to use one’s understanding without guidance from another” (Kant 1966: 25). In other words, a person of the modern era has learned to choose from what they perceive as tradition, selecting what is necessary and avoiding everything else, which shapes their perception of what they continue to *consider* tradition out of inertia. Therefore, the reproduction of Modernity is impossible without what is regarded as tradition at each specific historical stage. But what should be considered tradition that a person of the modern era wishes to appeal to? It is significant that

a modern individual deals with *a softened version of tradition that acknowledges the presence of alternatives*. Here, we are dealing with a situation similar to the one described by Charles Taylor for the realm of religion: belief in God in 1500 is not the same as belief in God in 2000, even though the doctrinal changes may be minimal (Taylor 2017: 17). The reason is that in 1500, religiosity virtually excluded any alternatives, whereas in 2000, it is one of the acceptable options for worldview. In the same way, the existence of communities that adhere to tradition within the “larger society” of Modernity alters both the content of tradition and the attitude toward it, smoothing over aspects that might have appeared off-putting in a situation of exclusivity. This situation, among other things, gives rise to romanticism as a worldview, which posits that “things were better in the past”. Since it is an extrapolation of a purified and tamed tradition into the past, such a past inevitably acquires the characteristics of a lost Eden. The reference to this semi-mythical past actively participates in the reproduction of the space of alternatives characteristic of Modernity up until a certain point.

For a long time, the classic example of a country embodying the most successful version of Modernity was the United States, with its unique combination of high modernism and local adherence to tradition rooted in the practices of Protestant churches and sects. Baudrillard considered America to be the original, vastly superior version of Modernity, a utopia materialized. However, the content of this utopia extended beyond “bourgeois” and Enlightenment ideals of rationality and progress. It was also a utopia of escaping civilization and culture in favor of a natural and partly archaic (what may also be referred to as “Indian”) alternative to them. This is why Baudrillard’s assertion that Europeans, unlike Americans, “do not have either the spirit or the audacity for what might be called the zero degree of culture, the power of unculture” is particularly telling (Baudrillard 2000: 153). In other words, to become genuine Modernity, one must combine the “zero degree of culture” with a certain degree of the utopian aspirations of high modernism, refracted through the fractures and heresies of tradition⁴. “The founders of New England, as Alexis de

⁴Baudrillard notices “how little the Americans have changed in the last two centuries – much less than European societies. ...the Americans kept intact – preserved as it was by a breadth of ocean that created something akin to temporal insularity – the Utopian and moral perspective of the men

Tocqueville wrote, were at the very same time ardent sectarians and impassioned innovators” (Tocqueville 1992: 53). But what, in essence, was the Protestantism of the denominations that originally populated America? It was a consequence of selecting that part of the spiritual heritage deemed acceptable for *modern* people, thereby laying the foundation for a private sectarian utopia on new land, away from the despotism of “civilization” and the coercion of orthodox church tradition. Thus, it involved religious and moral practices that became prerequisites for modern alternatives. Taken on their own terms, they may not have differed significantly from traditionally orthodox practices, and at times even exceeded them in terms of coerciveness⁵. However, when transported across the ocean, given the opportunity for utopian realization, and confronted with other like-minded practices, they formed a kind of exemplary space of modern alternatives – the American way of life and freedom.

All of this does not mean that America can serve as an example for those who wish to cultivate Modernity in a direct and simplistic sense – as a model from which to copy religions, political institutions, ideologies, and so on. In fact, the rather unimpressive success of such strategies has been recognized for some time. If we consider Modernity as the space of alternatives described above, then it makes sense to cultivate and maintain a *configuration of practices* that promote its reproduction, even though such practices may, in themselves, prove to be quite authoritarian. It goes without saying that this configuration will be unique each time due to the varying national and cultural heritage.

The above means that there are no compelling grounds for a rigid, highly ideologized opposition between Modernity and tradition. Modernity cannot be reduced to high modernism or the despotism of rationality and civilization; therefore, it is impossible without what is called tradition in each specific historical period.

of the eighteenth century, or even of the Puritan sects of the seventeenth, transplanted and kept alive, safely sheltered from the vicissitudes of history” (Baudrillard 2000: 166). This element of obsolescence, outmodedness, and backwardness in America – an “island in time” – is significant; yet it simultaneously positions America as the flagship of Modernity.

⁵ This fact was highlighted by A. de Tocqueville, who described some laws that were democratically adopted by communities as “bizarre or tyrannical”, pointing out that in these communities “the mores were still more austere and puritanical than the laws” (Tocqueville 1992: 51).

What we refer to as tradition simply does not exist outside the connection with high modernism, which together forms the relevant Modernity. If we reduce the current landscape to traditional values and contrast it with abstract Modernity, this will result in an unnecessary opposition between parts of an indivisible whole.

Therefore, the key task for those who are unwilling to part with the space of modern alternatives is to sustain this space by: a) resisting attempts to neutralize it, regardless of the source, and b) promoting positive alternatives in lifestyles, everyday life, and other manifestations of genuine freedom. At the global level, Russia currently plays this role by maintaining a space of choice for the greatest number of subjects in international relations. These external efforts must be complemented by internal ones that encourage civic initiative and innovation in various fields, rather than engaging in fruitless and disorienting opposition between “modernists” and “traditionalists”.

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