

Modernization and Gentle Barbarism

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The notion of 'gentle barbarism' was developed during our critical analysis of the discourses and mechanisms of 'modernisation' that emerged in the context of the movement for permanent reform (in education, the public services and business management), in which public bodies and businesses have been engaged since the 1980s. These discourses and mechanisms of modernisation seem to us to represent a blind spot where sociological analysis is concerned.

The term 'gentle barbarism' was coined to emphasise the eminently paradoxical nature of the phenomenon. It refers to a process of dehumanisation whose roots lie, not in some primordial aggression or violence of the kind that may be exerted in dictatorial or totalitarian regimes, but in democratic societies. Rather than leading to the visible destruction of the society or of individuals, it attacks that which gives meaning to human life in society, destructuring language and meanings and the cultural heritage passed down from one generation to the next and destroying the symbolic reference points around which communal life is structured. In so doing it renders both the world and the society we live in meaningless and empty, throwing individuals into a state of profound disarray and so inhibiting the very desire for debate and action.

The ideological discourse of modernisation

The continually reiterated assertions of the need for modernisation convey representations that give social and cultural significance to the changes under way and render both society and the world inhuman. This ideological discourse seems to us to be structured around four main themes.

- *It creates a shifting, chaotic image of the world and of society, making them incomprehensible and thus undermining the possibility of any desire to transform them. New developments are presented as the manifestation of a natural, irresistible movement over which no one has any control. The pace of change of the various factors involved seems so rapid that it is difficult – to say the least – to establish any points of stability and to anticipate developments. Nothing in the environment stands still and production is caught up in a constantly accelerating process of change. As one expert has said, jobs seem so unstable that, 'they are already changing and taking new forms' at the time they are being observed. How can the workforce acquire skills which must be 'continually updated' in preparation for 'ill-identified, evolving' jobs? Everything becomes subject to alteration and instability, swept along in a movement of perpetual,*

self-referential change. The society and the world in which we live lose their familiarity and their humanity; they become unrecognisable.

- The discourse of modernisation *combines with an adaptive logic of survival and urgency*: New developments and their effects occur at such speed that society has no choice but to adapt to them as quickly as possible if it does not want to fade away. In this chaotic world of upheaval, 'mobility', 'responsiveness' and 'flexibility' are the key values, while the need for stability becomes synonymous with immobility and a rejection of change. Reference is constantly made to the new information and communication technologies and to 'globalisation'. As advances in these areas are outpacing the evolution of attitudes, skills and economic and social structures, the desperate race to catch up seems endless, even though care is taken to suggest that no one should be left behind in this process of perpetual change,
- The discourse of modernisation *gives these developments such social and cultural importance that they imply a radical break with our traditional ways of living, acting and thinking*. The conceptions of human beings and of collective living that have been passed down through the generations are all regarded as obsolete, along with received modes of living in and acting on society. The discourse of modernisation incorporates its own version of the revolutionary theme of breaking with the past and starting from *tabula rasa*. Changes are continually presented as 'radical' and 'revolutionary': a 'radical' change in work, the 'radical reconstruction of the institutional framework of work', the 'technological revolution', the 'information revolution', the 'revolution in intelligence' and so on. To paraphrase both Trotsky and Mao Tse Tung, it could be said that the *revolution* extolled by management is at once *permanent, global and cultural*. Paradoxically, adaptation becomes revolutionary because developments in every domain are supposed to bring about radically new ways of living, acting and thinking. Ideas of breaking with the past and starting from *tabula rasa*, of shaping new human beings adapted to the new situation, are an integral part of this discourse. However, unlike revolutionary ideology, this 'revolution' does not seem able to conceive of a radiant future.
- The discourse of modernisation *calls for general mobilisation and participation*. Society and individuals are constantly called on to 'motivate' themselves, to be 'active' and to 'participate', to be 'independent' and 'responsible'. They are exhorted to become 'agents of change', 'of their own change'. Modernisation has all the features of a kind of *permanent cultural revolution* in which everyone is continually being told to be aware of the new world we live in and to question their own assumptions and frameworks, their own skills and performance, to assess whether or not they have adapted to the changes. If not, they are continually invited to change. Any resistance or opposition to this logic tends to be described as 'backward-looking' (or 'nostalgic') and assimilated to a defence of privilege or of strictly corporate interests.

The machinery of meaninglessness

Modernisation employs a great many mechanisms for evaluating skills and individual performance, as well as numerous courses aimed at improving motivation and communication. These mechanisms are being developed in different spheres of activity in the name of functional imperatives and are presented as *neutral, objective tools used by experts*.

But we should have no illusions about their objectivity and neutrality: value judgements and norms figure in the long list of skills identified by these mechanisms, which does not confine itself to covering purely professional skills alone. Also on the list are attitudes and behaviours which used to be classified as relating to the private sphere and social activities unconnected with work.

A model of faultless personal performance is held up: individuals owe it to themselves to be always motivated, performing at their best and able to communicate in total transparency with superiors, subordinates and colleagues alike. It seems that no aspect of the individual should remain uninvolved in work. This implies not simply developing professional and technical skills and 'investing in intelligence', but mobilising the entire human being. Today an individual's desires, dreams and imagination must all be invested in production. Feelings and passions are further parameters to be taken into account, with a view to obtaining optimum functioning. For those who become fascinated by this model of performance, the search for identification is endless. Taken to extremes it is a logic that turns individuals into participants in an exhausting race, which can never be definitively won and ultimately destroys their self-esteem and grasp of reality.

By splitting up skills into small packages, such mechanisms in fact reduce human beings to functional and adaptive machines. Skills are broken down as far as possible into separate elements, which are then itemised as norms and presented as targets which must be reached by those wishing to adapt to developments and to keep or find a job. Although it has new characteristics, this division and its concomitant obsession with classification and methodological formalism do not constitute any kind of fundamental break with Taylorism.

The mechanisms of modernisation adopt the very particular psychological approach of American behaviourist theories. Relationships with the self, with others and with situations are described in terms of the simple basic model of stimulus and response. True the stimulus is no longer physico-chemical in nature and the response is not confined to reactions of the senses, nerves, muscles or glands alone, as the early behaviourists saw it. These days more complex situations and phenomena have been included in the mix, such as feelings, 'inner states', thought and language, but always in terms of the same basic mechanistic model. In relation to the cognitive sciences, intelligence is regarded as a mechanism for processing information, whose functioning and development are a matter for experts. 'Savoir faire' involving behavioural and relationship skills is also incorporated into this model, along with 'Inner states', sensations, feelings and values, in a logic which reduces human beings at work to mechanisms that can be controlled and manipulated at will.

What this approach denies is culture in the sense of a world of meanings which makes sense of things, including more mechanical phenomena, and gives human beings their specificity. This world of meaning is not a superstructure or an extra element of soul which can be added to a purely functional activity from the outside. The activity of work, however operational and pragmatic it may seem, is fully part of this world, to which it owes its human face: 'There is no realm of work or empire of speech that is limited from without', wrote Paul Ricoeur, 'but there is a power of speech that infuses and penetrates everything human, including machines, tools and hands'...

In the mechanistic model employed by the mechanisms of skills evaluation, work loses the very thing that gives it its familiar, human dimension. Professional experience is

reduced to a process of information acquisition, know-how becomes a set of buzzwords, jargon and procedures that the experts are quick to formalise. Words and representations are reduced to the status of signs that have been emptied of the meaningful content given to them by those who work. Language becomes a 'tool' which the individual can be trained to use. Evaluation means measuring the distance from the target using various indicators that make it possible to quantify the level of performance attained. And, as the model of good performance is all-inclusive and is, as such, impossible to reach in practice, evaluation and the setting of new targets are never-ending processes.

This dehumanisation in practical terms is symptomatically linked to general, abstract discourses of 'ethics' and 'values', which are also subject to many studies and manipulations by the experts. These values are supposed to 'give meaning' from above to an activity which is at the same time being destructured from below and which thereby becomes meaningless in the literal sense.

Broken mirrors

The dehumanisation brought about by these discourses and mechanisms is of a singular kind. Society and individuals appear as fragments of a chaotic whole. They are part and parcel of a generalised upheaval, which is apparently inescapable, and have no choice but to adapt. Long-lived institutions, the creations of culture, the right to work and even laws themselves, also become obstacles to 'change'. How can a human collectivity live in a state of permanent instability? How can individuals find their place in this kind of global vision, other than as yet more fragments which are themselves fragmented, condemned to perpetual wandering through an aimless, meaningless world, with no stable, lasting certainties to hang on to? As Hannah Arendt² notes, the need for permanence and familiarity with the world is a feature of the human condition. We cannot do without these things, other than at the price of what makes us human.

Yet this is precisely what we see at work in skills evaluation, which involves the use of a mechanism that gives individuals dehumanised images of themselves. It is a process that reduces people to a collection of skills and to machinery seen as more or less well-adapted to 'natural' developments in which they themselves are simply elements among many.

The result is a strange interplay of reflections in which society and individuals are faced with distorted images of themselves. All reference to a third viewpoint has been removed, although this would enable them to escape the binary, narcissistic relationship in which the other is no more than a representation of the self and the fascinated ensnarement to which it may give rise³. But here we should at once add – and this is the most disconcerting and literally *mad* aspect of gentle barbarism – that this representation or figure of sameness is at the same time disfiguring, to the extent that the reflected image is disjointed and without meaning. The overall approach is quite singular: it reflects back a dehumanised image of society and individuals in which they cannot recognise themselves, but with which they are nevertheless encouraged to identify. Society and individuals find themselves looking into a mirror in which they can recognise only fragmented pieces of themselves, making identification impossible or literally deadly. Strictly speaking this is a logic of the destruction of identity.

The other side of this chaotic representation of the world and the individual is a language which appears ever more empty and disjointed. This is the language of communication, with its catch-phrases and ear-catching expressions that do violence to both language and reason. Political and institutional discourse tends to align itself with that of management and communication, and indeed of advertising. This type of discourse is unable to foster collaboration, any more than it offers a foothold for protest or revolt. Yet it is precisely this characteristic that enables it to produce its effects: it undermines all desires to respond before they have a chance to form, leaving people literally 'without a voice'. We have moved from a period in which propaganda presented ideas and doctrines with a view to obtaining support, to the reign of communication, in which meaningless messages and acts are spread by the effects of destabilisation.

Modernisation to no effect

The context of this practical dehumanisation is one in which historical time has become disjointed. Modernisation is seen in relation to a situation of perpetual change. It can no longer root itself in a historical continuum whose meaningfulness gives it a human face. The present seems to 'float', as though suspended, continually breaking with a past that seems without resources and an indeterminate future open to possible regressions. This loss of historical meaning leaves the way open to a confused, evolutionist discourse in which the Big Bang and plant and animal evolution combine with economic, technical, social or cultural changes. A chaotic vision of society and the world develops, defusing the very idea that one might have any effect on what will happen. This seems to us to be an accurate description of the new representations with which society has been more or less consciously infused and echoes the idea of a world given over to the 'natural', unbridled laws of the market.

Yet a developed society cannot live without a representation of where it is going; there is a need to re-draw a vision of the future. This need, unlike the idea of a radical break with the past and a new beginning from *tabula rasa*, implies that we reappropriate the gains of our democratic inheritance. A society that makes its past meaningless cannot build an identifiable future. The modernist illusion consists in thinking that current upheavals are such as to render meaningless the certainties we have inherited from tradition. Yet it is precisely because we live in a world that is no longer structured by an imposed tradition that it is possible for us to have a freer, more lucid relationship to the past.

There are profound doubts concerning the western cultural heritage and our democratic tradition, following the wars and the experience of totalitarianism in the 20th century. We need to accept the ambivalence of our own history and use our judgement to give value to what we have gained. In this context, our democratic political culture constitutes a fundamental resource for rebuilding an idea of progress wrought by human beings, which can bring us well-being and emancipation. The creation of something new relies on the existence of a common world, passed down through the generations, as opposed to perpetual change that dehumanises society and the world.

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Translated from the French by Trista Selous

Notes

1. Paul Ricœur, 'Travail et parole', *Histoire et vérité*, Paris, Seuil 1955, p. 212.
2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1969.
3. See the work of Pierre Legendre, particularly *Le Désir politique de Dieu. Étude sur les montages de l'État et du droit*, Paris, Fayard 1988; *Dieu au miroir. Étude sur l'institution des images*, Paris, Fayard 1994.