

STS 007

Reading Questions on Christian, *Maps of Time*, Chapter 11, “Approaching Modernity”

This is the first chapter of Part V, “The Modern Era: One World.” (Note that the title of this Part gives a geographical emphasis to the emergence of “modernity” or, in Christian’s terminology, “the Modern Revolution.”) This chapter presents a long, analytical introduction to Christian’s explanation of the “rise of the modern world,” which he describes in more detail in the next two chapters.

How does Christian justify spending so much of his book to this very short period of time? Why is this transformation more significant—for humanity and for the world—than any other to date? Is it just beginning or almost over? Do we have a way of knowing? (335)

In the first section of the chapter Christian describes another type of mass extinction that humans have caused: the extinction, in modern times, of many alternative forms of human societies, now swept away by the Modern Revolution (top of 342, also top of 348). Describe the mix of different types of human societies before this happened. In many cases, people who lived in agricultural civilizations referred to others (foragers, pastoralists, horticulturalists, small-scale farmers) as “barbarians.” What does this term mean? How did these “barbarians” typically live? What are some of the most active and interesting points of contact and exchange among the various types of pre-modern societies? What are some of the technologies, goods, and ideas that were transferred among them? (336-341)

Review the major categories of change that make today’s world “utterly different from the world of seven or eight hundred years ago” (342): population, productivity and energy supplies, ability of states to impose power (through bureaucracies and also through violence), “transformed lifeways,” new modes of consciousness, and acceleration of the pace of change, i.e. of history itself. What are “lifeways”? How is this term different from “lifestyles”? Which of these changes are predominantly material and which ones are predominantly cultural/psychic? How do they connect, and what material changes underlie the more psychic ones? (Note on p. 359 Christian returns to these theme of connecting material and psychic changes when he discusses the “disciplining” effects of capitalism.)

Which of these changes seems most significant to you? Are you convinced by Christian’s argument that among new technologies, those relating to energy production and use are critical? Are you convinced by his argument that the management of energy supplies presents particular challenges just because of their apparent abundance? (342-351)

Christian tells us that the Modern Revolution is not an “out of Europe” phenomenon (that is, not analogous to the human revolution, which came “out of Africa”) but a global one, from which Europe happened to be in the best position to benefit. In other words, Christian is arguing that history works differently than it used to because it has become global history. Keep this hypothesis in mind as you read this and following chapters: are you persuaded? (351)

The main problem, he writes, is to account for the sudden, global acceleration in innovation, which made it possible for civilizations to break out of the Malthusian cycles of lagging

productivity (as discussed in the last chapter). On the other hand, it makes contemporary civilizations vulnerable to business cycles caused by overproduction: keep this in mind as we discuss the possible “collapse” or “crash” of 20th century American power. (352)

Thereafter Christian walks us through the various explanations for the Modern Revolution, in each case telling us why he finds them inadequate (not necessarily wrong, but not sufficient either):

--demography

--geography (in the sense of resource availability, such as fossil fuels)

--ideals and inner motivations (e.g. Max Weber’s thesis)

--commercial exchanges (e.g. Adam “Smithian” emphasis on markets fostering division of labor and thus innovation)

--social structure (e.g. Karl Marx on modes of production that promote innovation by concentrating wealth in the hands of a few, who benefit from the profits when new techniques are introduced, while leaving many people without means of production and so forced to sell their labor)

This review of causes of modernity gives you a brief introduction to some of the most influential social theorists of modern times (Weber, Smith, Marx, with living social scientists like Giddens , Wolf, and Mokyr in supporting roles). Make sure you understand their basic ideas of these theorists. Note their approach to history: they are using historical evidence to understand the origins and workings of modern society works. What gets left out of their account? (352-360)

The chapter concludes as Christian tells us what he has told us and what he is going to tell us (“signposting”): he will present a synthetic global explanation for the Modern Revolution that includes elements of the above plus an emphasis on an unprecedented global system of exchange in information/knowledge which favored the Atlantic shores of Europe and North America as a new global hub. Just as he had described Paleolithic societies as being “pre-adapted” for agriculture, he will argue that western European societies were pre-adapted for industrialization.(360-363)

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