

Week2 Periodization

The impulse to use the term “early modern” and “modern” by those interested in periodization (historians, sociologists, etc.) comes mainly from their curiosity as to “how we have come to where we are.” We live in modern times and we want to know something about the times a little earlier than now. In this sense, one might claim that the term “early modern” is not value-laden. One might even say that, if “the modernization is,” according to Gladstone, “simply a fact of history,” the historical interest to understand its early phase will be simply an instinct of a historian rather than “our period’s discomfort about periodization,” as Starn puts it.

When one applies the term “early modern” to more than one society simultaneously, or attempts to use it in the comparative analysis of their histories, or even uses it universally to indicate certain time period (roughly 1500-1750), however, the “early modern” ceases to be neutral and reveals itself as a value-laden term. It becomes a standard or a gauge by which we evaluate each society’s developmental stage in a world history. This is why the term “early modern” cannot be taken as neutral as the “early Roman.” And here begins the debate on periodization of the “early modern” or “modern” era.

I think that this problem is caused mainly by the duality of the term “modern” or “modernity” both as a historical and a sociological term (Gladstone’s article). As a sociological term, “modern” is the stage at which we are now in terms of democracy, religious freedom, and the mode of production. Then, “early modern” will be just one stage before the current one. “Early modern” with its sociological implication (whether functionalist or Marxist) is, however, almost useless for a historian’s periodization, because, as Gladstone points out, early modern society in its truly functionalist sense (government, religion, *and* technology) is nowhere before the 19th century (even in Western Europe) and the one in its Marxist sense can be found almost everywhere in almost every era. In either case, I suggest we should not do “sociological (early) modernity limbo,” testing if a certain period meets a set of our standards of being “early modern” or “modern.” It offers little prize for a historian.

Having denied the sociological “early modern” its use in historical periodization,

we can turn to the “modern” as a historical term. That means we need to examine the modern/modernity *in the making* as a historical process instead of projecting our standard of modernity back onto the past in search of its “early” phase. What, then, should we look at in order to delineate the changing times or the making of a new era, if the functionalist or Marxist criteria don’t work well? For this purpose, I think Huizinga’s historical approach gives a useful viewpoint with which to describe an age. Instead of official or functional analysis, he described a society or an age in terms of contemporaries’ perception of themselves, their lives, and their world. Take a look at his chapter titles: “the violent tenor of life,” “pessimism and the ideal of the sublime life,” “the vision of death,” “the hierarchic conception of society,” “the idyllic vision of life,” etc. This kind of perception is of course formulated and constrained by the form of government, the degree of religious freedom, and the mode of production, but is not fully determined by either of them, partly because those factors do not go hand in hand to a common destination. Being at the meta-level of social reality, the contemporaries’ perception of themselves and their world might be somewhat abstract and vague, but it truly reflects the political, religious, and material condition of the era. I think Huizinga’s approach to the Middle Ages will also be useful in describing the modern in the making.

Just because we are living in the modern age, it is not very easy to treat “modern” as a historical term and to investigate how modernity was formed as history unfolded itself. One has to consistently suppress the temptation to run the modernity test or to search for the “early modern.” Without setting the present age as the finish line of history, however, I believe we will obtain much more interesting stories of how we’ve got here. And, aside from all the historiographical issues, I think that the term “early modern” should be reserved for future historians who will live in a very non-modern age with a very different historical perspective (whatever it might be like).