THE MODERN VERSUS THE POST-MODERN POLITICAL CONDITION: COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

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I

In my interpretation, post-modernity is not an autonomous historic period or an era, subsequent to modernity as its replacement or negation. It is a dominant trend within late (or recently matured) modernity, a time of taking inventory of critical assessment. As a result, analyses of the post-modern political condition will appear to be disconcertingly void of originality; they will be maps of a domain which is parasitic on modernity. By contrast, the most cursory scrutiny of modern politics, born out of great convulsions, particulary out of the French Revolution, will display the uninhibited grandeur of political imagination, the boldness of the design of political reason. And the former cannot be understood without the latter; as mentioned, post-modernity is nothing else but the critical stock-taking of modernity.

The modern political domain has been constituted by a series of inventions; the first of them is the invention of “society”. The earlier appellations of the aggregate of human affairs and the human domain “world”, city-state, the City of Man (versus the City of Good), the Kingdom of the divine (or the merely god-annointed) prince, widely differed in meaning, but they had one thing in common: what we, moderns, call “society” (versus “state”) remained undistinguished in them. Governance and rule may have comprised the Aristotelian one, few or many, but it knew no distinction of “state” and “society”. Therefore terming the various stages of the pre-modern world “societies” and studying them as such, in separation from their “state” is one of those uncritical applications of modernity’s devices to the pre-modern, which are in need of an overhaul.

A first working definition of “society” is “everything which is not the state”. Vague as it is, the carving out of a huge domain, as distinct from the
locus sui generis of power and domination, has designated an enormous measure of emancipation. It implied, first, a reversal of the traditional order of human topography. Modernity, as contrasted to the pre-modern, could no longer be illustrated, not as least in its “normal” periods, by the simile of the pyramid: those who were “high up” gained, for the first time in recorded history, their legitimation not from Him who was even higher up, but from those who were below. Furthermore, the separation of “society” from “state” also implied that, by removing one man’s -the monarch’s- suffocating stranglehold over everyone’s every single life-manifestation, a huge area was evacuated in which the individual (yet another modern invention) was literally autonomous: it gave laws unto itself.

However, the major difference consisted of the fact that people did different things in “society” and in the “state”. Initially, the division of labor, never entirely overcome in modernity, resulted in different people (the political class of a largely traditional descent) doing things differently from those being done in society. With the spread of democracy, the same people did different things when “in society” and “in the state”. The typical “things” done in society were production, founding families and procreating (thereby re-producing the species), creating culture and developing science, conducting discourse on common affairs, all in this order of importance, at least according to the greatest modern theorist of “society”, Karl Marx. In terms of his anthropology, these were the genuinely substantial, “material” human deeds. When, in his youthful polemics against Hegel, Marx worked out his “materialism”, it was much less a cosmological or ontological statement than setting forth the thesis of the primacy of society (with its crucial and determining “material” activities) over the state.

“State”, this second major invention of modern politics, can therefore be conceived of only in separation from and in contrast to “society”. Unlike “material and substantive society”, the state is “spiritual” in the elementary sense of the transfiguration of the locus of power. The King’s Body, a locus of domination so tangible that the great early revolutionaries -from Cromwell to Robespierre- felt an irresistible urge to decapitate it, was transformed into the “body politic” which is not corporeal, but rather a metaphysical abstraction. La nation of Sieyes, the general will of Rousseau, were entities not principally different from Kant’s transcendental freedom; for Laplace it was a smooth transition to apply the arithmetical method of his “celestial mechanics”, in his capacity of the Minister of the Interior under Napoleon, to the arithmetics of the “will of all”.

What kind of activities area pursued in the “state” as distinct from “society”? First, the state on the basis of its power delegated by this impersonal and abstract entity, “the popular sovereign” represents society. This means above all that the state can “read the mind” of society, on the grounds of a general
mandate, on all issues where society does have the will but neither the competence nor the time to make an explicit statement. Secondly, "the will of all" is almost never coextensive with the general will, given the permanent social divisions in the modern world. But even if it is, it is a mere aggregate, whereas the "general will" is the purified, the authentically political form of the new sovereign's volition. This is why "general will" resides in the state, and not in society, the former being the representative of generality versus endless particularities. (This is the locus classicus of what Marx describes as ideological self-delusion). But, in a surprising metamorphosis, this agent of generality, the state, is at once the agent of particularity as opposed to universality "human-kind" which is not, and for the mainstream of modern political thinking should not, become a political entity. The paradigmatic form of the emergence of the "state" is the self-segregation of a particular ethnos-demos from a defunct universal order. This is how the Reformation became the cradle of modern nationalism; this is how the self-discrediting of Enlightenment universalism in the French Revolution and under the new Charlemagne-Napoleón- ushered in the century of the nation state; this is how the collapse of communist universalism gives now way to ethnic strife. (And this is also why the observation of Carl Schmitt, wrongly localized in the theological roots of modern politics, is correct: the typical form in which the (nation) state articulates its activity is "the friend-foe" relationship). Finally, everywhere -with the exception of the "pure" democracies of the new worlds- the state arrogates to the role of the educator of society. It claims to be "the repository of the spirit of nation"; as the law-giver, it claims to itself the only space in which justice can be done (in society, there is only "mob justice"). By allegedly standing above particularities, its actions purport to represent "solidarity" and unselfishness vis-a-vis egoistic-particularistic interest.

The third great political invention of modernity is "the social question", which serves as the major link between the "state" and "society". It is a purely modern invention. For without the proclamation of universal rights, ninety per cent of those issues which now constitute "the social question" would have been, and indeed were, regarded as either natural or god- given afflictions and grievances of the human condition about which rulers and governments could not and should not do anything. At the very best, these issues were considered pragmatic and third-rate exigences. This is so because the voices of those suffering poverty, infirmities of old age and ill health, caste, class, gender, race and other kinds of discriminations and the like, were not audible in the political arena before the proclamation of the rights of man and citizen. At the same time, with a hundred years of experience behind us concerning legislation on social issues, social engineering and the welfare state, it can be safely stated that -at least under the conditions created by modernity- the social question has to be continually and earnestly addressed, but it can never be solved "permanently". This is so for three reasons. First, while formal equality (before the law) is an absolute precondition of the survival of modernity, egalite de fait
has been, since it was proposed by Babeuf and his group in the French Revolution, more or less universally discarded as a tyrannical arrangement. Secondly, modernity has continually been a dynamic system propelled by the ideology of, and the need for, growth which excludes even a hypothetical state of satiation. Thirdly, and not unrelated to the latter, the story of modernity tells us that the solution of every single social issue generates a new one, ad infinitum.

Socialism, the major protagonist of the politics of modernity, has grown directly out of "the social question"; both its "science" and its utopia are directly related to it. The utopian demand for the "ultimate" solution of "the social question" was a deeply contradictory one, given the Faustian, intrinsically dynamic character of the socialist project. At the same time, this utopia has been needed for the survival of modernity whose balance was continuously threatened by what Karl Polanyi called the liberal-capitalist utopia, by the belief in the ultimately beneficial results of the "invisible hand", of the self-regulatory operation of the free market. Socialism has always located the roots of the social question in the inherently unequal or "exploitative" or "alienated" character of "society" in modernity, while its remedy was sought either in the transformation of "society" itself (to be accompanied by the radical elimination of the state) or, on the contrary, in a strong, paternalistic and supervisory state.

From all these new inventions, a fundamentally disharmonic view of the essence of modernity transpired. Almost all political actors, both on the "left" and the "right" (this dichotomy was yet another self-explanatory device of the politics of modernity), have been seeing the new world as a dynamic cosmos, but also one suffering from chronic and perhaps incurable self-contradictions: progressive but unstable in itself, therefore being in constant need of guiding principles and "scientific steering"; inherently dialectical which made the reconciliation of opposites illusory without politics having philosophical principles. (It belongs to the ironies of the politics of modernity that not just the ultra-radical Robespierre was an ideologue who promised that his strategy will "realize the promises of philosophy", but so was the "pragmatic" Burke, the arch-enemy of politics based on abstractions).

Instead of a typology of the politics of modernity, pointing out a few of its dominant features will suffice; two necessary points of caveat are, however, called for. First, both on the conservative and the liberal side there were important exceptions; and many of the social democratic parties became liberal, in reaction to communist extremism, both in terms of internal structure and social program. Secondly, what is called here "dominant features" have developed in a succession of steps, in line with the progressive democratization of politics. In early modernity, the public scene was dominated by elites of "notables" who behaved not very differently from earlier aristocracies. With
this restriction, the following features can be listed. The dominant types of modern politics were philosophically conditioned, and they never aimed at the mere exigences of the day, at “delivering the goods” but at something much more “sublime”: at the absolute reconciliation of the inherent contradictions of modernity, often at its consistent homogenization or the reduction of its complexity. Their “ideologies of progress” was more often than not of the teleological kind with a strongly historicist overtone. Politics had to serve “the goal of history,” promote “the end of history” and the advent of “real history”, it had to tell, and be inspired by, the grand narrative of humankind’s saga from “not-yet-history” to the teleologically pre-destined terminus of the journey. (Fukuyama’s famous and much maligned article refers precisely to this conception of the interrelationship of history and politics). Universal progress as politics was extended to the politics of production, having the proud goal of “forcing back nature’s barriers” or the even haughtier one of putting back Man the Master into the center of the natural world (from which it had been expelled by its own self-created natural sciences). The conception of modernity as an “artifice” explains the unique “creativity” of moder politics (both in a positive and a negative sense). The whole domain of the political has been constantly reinvented with, as well as aestheticized. The “aesthetics of war” negotiated a smooth transition from Napoleon who complained about the unwieldiness of huge masses of soldiers, this democratic fallout of universal draft damaging the choreography of battles, to Fascist leaders and aesthetes, for example Ernst Junger, who raved about the artistic greatness of warfare. The theatricality of modern politics, in which the actors -from Danton to Trotsky- looked from the scene, watching their present and future audience in the manner of the historic figures on Poussin’s canvasses, was not merely “histrionics”. They were all sharing, wittingly or unwittingly, Napoleon’s profound dictum that in modernity, politics plays the role which had been acted out by the Greek ananke, tragic fate. And this feature of aestheticizing politics was not restricted to the radical actors. The apercu that Churchill fought World War Two so resolutely in order to write a dramatic (and self-dramatizing) narrative about it, is a joke of the si non e vero, e ben trovato type. Finally, the dominant patterns of modern politics emanate a “redemptive” feature (with a personal or collective redeemer). In this function, politics served as ersatz morality and ersatz religion. Redemptive politics provided out of itself what “society” could not generate with its own devices: greatness, heroism, selflessness. It also offered a substitute transcendence for a problematically secularized epoch: the recognition of posterity.

For the reasons listed above, the politics of modernity has been from the very outset not only a pursuit of the liberty of the moderns (as, for example, Benjamin Constant predicted it) although undeniably, and happily, this was the mainstream, but also an ongoing Grand Experiment with total domination. Totalitarian rule could be initiated both from the side of “society” and the “state”. If “society” is its point of departure (in other words, if we are discuss-
ing what Jacob Talmon termed "totalitarian democracy"), the ideology, legitimizing total rule is the priority of "happiness" over freedom. If the "state" is the *primum movens* of total rule, in the majority of the cases (political, national and aesthetic) grandeur gains the upper hand over "banalistic" freedom and life. In both of its versions, the Grand Political Experiment has brought modernity to the very brink of collapse.

II

It was just recently, basically in the last decade, that the post-modern inventory of the products of moder politics has begun. However, it could have started earlier. For Gorbachev is right when, in one of his farewell gestures to the world of politics, he made the remark that the last moment in which Soviet society could have negotiated a smooth transition to democracy, was the moment of victory over Hitler. Had the ruling Soviet apparatus gathered the necessary courage and selflessness to put an end, then and there, to Stalin’s rule of the terror. We would have entered the era of post-modern politics half a century earlier, for almost all possible configurations of the modern political domain had been by then experimented with and tested. But since we now are in the hour of reckoning, it is our task to make the inventory.

The first yield of the post-modern inventory is the observation that the grand narratives have completely evaporated from politics. Despite the now trendy and highly inadequate characterization of the East-European changes (and those taking place in what used to be the Soviet Union) in terms of "the triumph of capitalism", the wholesale characterization of the modern world as either "capitalist" or "socialist" will probably leave us soon. This is not to deny the capitalist character of the present global economy, dominated by oligopolies whose power and interests transcend the borders of the nation state (insofar as we still wish to use a Marxist terminology). This forecast, rather, implies the following considerations. First, it was a nineteenth-century bias, shared both by radicals and liberals, from Marx to the classics of English political economy, that the primary type of human activities is the economic which determines everything else. This dominant nineteenth-century vision of the world has been dangerously reductive of modernity, and it is now, in the process of the post-modern inventory, that we are rectifying its one-sidedness. Secondly, the most critical version of a possible new political economy which would aim at thoroughgoing reforms will in all probability rest on the following premises. A market-based economic system cannot, and should not, be replaced by a system of state planning and distribution in which the state plays the role of a nominal general proprietor (while in fact, corporatist groups govern). This is so because of both the primacy of freedom and economic efficiency. The truth of this statement has been more than sufficiently borne out by the story of Soviet communism which was as bloody politically as it was catastrophic economically. At the same time, the economy in a democracy
cannot remain the private domain of those who own enterprises and manage them. It is a public institution, overwhelmingly in private custody, (or in the mixed custody of the state and private entrepreneurs) which in its entirety has to satisfy at least two general societal expectations and requirements. The first is keeping production on a level where the culturally-socially defined minimum can be guaranteed for everyone. This expectation is tied up with the postulate of growth in the dynamic world of modernity. The second requirement is that economy must generate opportunity for work, the conditions for a near-complete employment, because modern democracy, in which the Hegelian recognition of the individual stems neither from inherited wealth nor from social prerogatives, but from work as a dominant lifestyle, is incompatible with the existence of a Roman type of proletariat within its walls. The postulate of the social steering of economy as a public institution in private custody may be radical (or utopian) enough for conservatives, but it has hardly anything to do with the old "capitalism versus socialism" model. It is social justice, democratic postulates and cultural expectations that define its politics, and not any kind of economic determinism; and it aims at a continuous rearrangement of the economic institutions of modernity, but not their total substitution by the ingenious inventions of "dialectical reason" which foster economic irrationality and political terror.

The elan vitale of historicism, the great ambition of closing "pre-history" and transcending it, towards, "genuine history", has equally evaporated from modern politics. In fact, the dominant spirit of the post-modern political condition is the suspicion of historicism and either the rejection of the revolutionary project or the intent to declare it completed. We have an excellent testimony of this prevailing post-modern hostility to History writ large, the novel by Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Sabina, the Czech paintress, who was brought up under the iron-fisted rule of History, loathes History; for her, it is just an endless and soulless Grand Parade. By contrast, for her lover, the cosmopolitan Westerner of the 68-generation, History has an irresistible appeal: "How nice it was to celebrate something, demand something, protest against something; to be out in the open, to be with others. The parades filing down the Boulevard Saint-Germain or from the Place de la Republique to the Bastille fascinated him. He saw the marching, shouting crowd as the image of Europe and its history. Europe was the Grand March. The march from revolution to revolution, from struggle to struggle, ever onward". The refusal of History by the other Czech protagonist, Tomas, is even weightier, because it stems from methodical skepticism, not just from private aversion: "Einmal ist Keinmal. What happens but once might as well not have happened at all. The history of the Czechs will not be repeated, nor will the history of Europe. The history of the Czechs and of Europe is a pair of sketches from the pen of mankind's fateful inexperience. History is as light as individual, human life unbearably light, light as a feather, as dust swirling into the air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow".
The East-European, post-modernist skepticism concerning the "redemptive" role of the historicist project, voiced so forcefully by Kundera or Havel, is in fact a distant echo of a Western disillusionment with History. It was Merleau-Ponty who drew from the adventures of the dialectic the conclusion most emphatically and full of resignation: "Reason in History", represented with so much arrogance by Bolshevism, was yet another "ruse of reason" in which "History" remained an entity alien and menacing to the ordinary lives of ordinary mortals. It was a project subduing, not liberating them; Reason in the hands of the "agents of History" turned into Unreason, that is, into the untarnished rule of naked violence. On his part, Francois Furet repeatedly stated on the occasion of the bicentennial of the French Revolution that fiddling around with the "revolutionary theater" is a pure, self-serving game; the French Revolution, the mother of all similar minded projects had been long terminated. His statement of fact was a bit rash, because the momentous events of 1989-91 were necessary for the completion and termination of the revolutionary project. Yet once the mêlée was over, while post-modern politics could then aim at the drastic overhaul of the institutions of modernity, it could be "revolutionary politics" only in rhetoric.

Carl Schmitt's famous thesis of the centrality of the "friend-and-foe" relationship as the axis of modern politics is equally discarded by the developments in the post-modern political condition, by the rejection of the "grand narrative". The "friend-foe" opposition was of course initially devised as a major dynamic of generating cohesion within the nation-state by declaring its situation to be one of a permanent state of emergency. It was also predicated upon the almost holy status of war between nations. But everyone who now sees the embarrassed groping in the dark of American policy, for a foe threatening shadow can generate the domestic consensus of the Cold War era, can easily understand how the "friend-foe" thesis was magnified into one of the sustaining narratives of modernity. There are two major reasons for the limited applicability of Schmitt's device (apart from the third and weighty one that with the totalitarian rules of different kinds now-gone, the necessary demonology cannot be built up). One of the reasons is that in the new global order which begins to take shape, despite all its evidently hypocritical features, "victory", defeating the foe, is a less and less translatable category (as has been shown by both the aftermath of the Gulf War and the United States intervention in Panama). With the overt domination of one nation by another becoming inadmissible, with the direct interference in the internal affairs of the other turned into a taboo; with playing the untarnished role of the "liberator" who takes care of the business of the "liberated" declared a nonoption, the politics of defeating the foe has become meaningless. Big powers continue to do business as usual, but they cannot generate the enthusiasm and internal cohesion which springs from it only if - to use Nietzsche's language - the predatory instincts of this cold monster, the nation state, are not weakened in a cowardly manner by that Christian invention, the human rights. The second factor which
invalidates the value of the “friend-foe” thesis as raw material of a grand narrative, is the changed status of war in late modernity. Due to the terrible destructive power of the modern weapons as well as to Hitler’s mode of belligerence in which victory on the battlefield and genocide were inseparable, the dominant attitude in the post-modern condition is a sweeping (and often mindless) pacifism, the increasing “criminalization” of war. But without war, the narrative of “friend and foe” is a sham.

Finally, it has tremendously contributed to the demise of the grand narrative that politics has ceased to be the ersatz religion of a problematically secularized world. For politics to function as a substitute religion two preconditions are needed: the Fuehrercult and its capacity to render meaning to individual lives. The Fuehrers—both Hitler and Stalin— are now historically defunct scarecrows, (or, in a more optimistic version, eternal memorizes), Mussolini has been cut down to size as a failed, albeit intellectually highly sophisticated, national dictator, and what is these days called “Charisma” in the notoriously inadequate language of politics is a mere media value, a sex appeal. No soldier would now die with the names of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher or Francois Mitterand on his lips, and less than that does not suffice for charisma which is a term of religious provenance finding its proper place in “redemptive politics”. We shall be advised about the meaning which politics can render to life from a literary trend: Jorge Semprun is perhaps the last significant writer of a long line which began with Malraux and in which both the writer-intellectual and the protagonists of the novel found the answers to their existential questions in politics. The situation that today prevails rather resembles Max Weber’s conclusion drawn from his trip in America. He quoted his partners in conversation who never concealed their contempt for the politicians whom they voted in office. But they added: it is much better if we despise them than that situation where they would despise us. And this is decidedly an adverse condition for politics qua ersatz religion.

The post-modern sobering-up after the intoxication with various grand narratives occurs in the sign of two discoveries; both analyzed in detail by A. Heller and myself elsewhere. The first consists of the recognition of “the three logics of modernity”. These “logics” have been identified as the developmental trends of technology, the functional division of labor and the experimentation with statecraft. Their relative separateness is not a “scientific discovery”, but rather a (post-modern) decision taken on the perspectives of modernity. Nineteenth century politics did not want to know about these relatively separate domains. Technological progress (which included the revolution of science, the mastery of the world by the Faustian Man) seemed to be the claim of man to immortality, the distinctive feature of the modern age, the ultimate answer to all open questions. As a result, the functional order of modernity was shaped to serve technological progress to the point where the functional division of labor and technology, “capitalism” and industrialization seemed to
be indistinguishable. Furthermore, all experiments with the “optimal form of the state” were aiming at the optimal service rendered by the state to technological progress. (The Bolshevik state was one of such masterpieces achieved in the “social laboratory”). This was the way of reducing the complexity of modernity by “capitalism” and “socialism”, these dominating ideologies of the nineteenth century, alike. The first signs of a post-modern awakening are now in sight. The limits to technology, at least theoretically set by environmentalism, the querying of an all-pervasive functionalism by the culture critique, the ideological neutralization of the state by mass democracy, a situation in which the most divergent lobby groups use their voting power for power-sharing- all these post-war developments in the world have the following meanings. Technology is no longer seen as the main self-generating power that determines, and should determine, every other sphere. The concrete pattern of the functional division of labor is not considered eternally given, but rather one that can be changed also by social considerations. The state is no longer regarded as the agent of technological progress, guaranteeing its best possible conditions as well as the well-being of those who are the prime profiteers from it, but as a general care-taker of societal affairs; not as a class agency but, for better or for worse, as a relatively independent factor.

“Modernity’s pendulum”, a chart of modernity’s dynamic, could only be drawn on this basis. This theory comprises the following theses, all of whom defining the politics of the post-modern condition. First, the pendulum can only swing in a world where modernity has globally broken through, although for the most part, it is only its structure that is copied, without is dynamic actually operating worldwide. Second, modernity’s break through means the relative separation of the “state” from “society” (or the other way around, the relatively separate establishment of these spheres means that modernity has arrived); and in their coexistence, “society” has a relative priority. All major impetuses that constitute the swing of the pendulum come from “society”; hence the pendular character of the dynamic. The movements can go only as far as the “energies” of those who have given the impetus. The overarching metaphor of the theory tells us that there no attempt is made to create a (pseudo-) science of social energetics. It is rather the hermeneutical category of “the horizon” that is being used here. Human actors want to reach their horizon, and it is in this direction that their impetuses go. But “horizon” is not only a signpost, it is also a limit. Whenever the recognition dawns upon the actors that they have reached their limit (while meanwhile they have changed their positions and thus have created new horizons for themselves), the impetus would touch base and swing in a new direction. The tale of “modernity’s pendulum” is not a revamping of the old theory of cyclic development, nor is it a stationary understanding of a dynamic world. But it is certainly a cautionary tale in harmony with the post-modern process of sobering up. It says that there is never and nowhere a limitless development; there is always a limit to human aspirations set by our position in the world which also defines our
horizon; and that the dream of crossing the horizon is a dangerous folly, a leap into the abyss.

A particularly important item on the political agenda is the troubled relationship of universalism and particularism. Modernity's great achievement was the secularization and globalization of political universalism. The politics of modernity stripped the Christian language of human rights of its religious garb and could thus extend it, as a political charter, to the whole of humanity, across cultures. At the same time, the universalist political agenda of modernity was marred and flawed in a three-fold way; this recognition dawns upon us in the post-modern political condition. First, political universalism went hypocritically hand-in-hand with the practice of colonialism which only collapsed half a century ago, after World War Two. Second, it could never establish "humankind" as a political world authority. While the idea of a (cosmopolitan-republican or socialist-internacionalist) world order may be one of the pernicious delusions of modernity, the fact that all blueprints for a global authority have ended in caricatures like the League of Nations or the United Nations is a dangerous sign of the political impotence of the universalist project. Finally, universalism was developing at the cost of the extinction of the differences. One can safely assert that the model of universalism's triumphal march was the forced assimilation of the Jews. In terms of this model, the legal-political emancipation was immediately followed by the categorical demand of Jewish assimilation to the concretely given dominant pattern of the nation-state; it was accompanied by the never complete admittance into society and its various institutions; and finally, emancipation was quite often reversed by newly issued discriminatory laws whenever political hysteria gripped a particular group. The result, on the side of the assimilated, was a thorough and neurotizing loss of identity accompanied by the frustration of remaining eternally alien. This "Jewish" feeling now comes to the surface in the post-modern political condition in a generalized form in the demands of the most heterogeneous groups: descendants of former slaves, ethnic minorities doomed to extinction by the iron hand of the centralizing state, the native Indian populace in Latin-America striving for identity, and the like. The positive formula of the "difference" seeking its own social recognition is "multiculturalism". Multiculturalism as a political and social demand brings in relief the whole complexity and the tangled character of the (post-modern) "politics of the difference". The historical way of building collective identities after the dissolution of Christian universalism via the molding of a single particular culture as the "substance" of a human group has been one of the major paths treading which modernity has been created. The other solution, the "contractual" one, in which a document (the Constitution) alone, and not any cultural substance, generated group identity, has always remained the exception, not the rule; and in critical times, it almost always proves insufficient. Therefore the insistence upon the one and only cultural substance of a particular group, which cements them into a cohesive, rational and emotional unity is more than bias or xenophobia. At the
same time, it blocks the road to the legitimate demands of various "differences" for recognition and autonomy. There are, in addition, two various factors which further aggravate this nascent conflict of the post-modern political condition. First, there is no meta-authority whose judgment could be sought for and listened to with trust. The absence of the political existence of "human-kind", mentioned above here comes in full display as a lacuna. In fact, this is already the second round of a fairly old story. When President Wilson tried to sum up the moral-political lessons of the cataclysm of World War One in the slogan of the universal recognition of the right to national self-determination, but when all attempts to create a universal authority which would distinguish between rightful and unfounded claims broke down hopelessly, then the result was the triggering of a chain conflict, directly leading to a new cataclysm. The second aggravating factor is that the self-multiplying "differences" in the post-modern political condition establish their "mini-discourses". The specificity of mini-discourse is the outright denial of its adequate translatability into any universal language. There is, of course, a great deal of confusion, even hypocrisy, in such demands, for every difference wants to achieve recognition via legally established rights, and the "rights language" is a universalist medium. But the drive for self-closure leaves basically one avenue open that of violence between the differences which cannot speak any language in common.

This unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, dilemma brings us to the heaviest item on the political agenda of the post-modern political condition: biopolitics. Biopolitics is an heir to, and the direct descendant of, the demise of class politics. The end of class politics has nothing to do with any illusory assumption of social harmony in the modern world, of the social question having been solved, or a social homogeneity based either on social justice or on equality, having been established anywhere. The social question, in all countries but those which have a strong version of the welfare state, has been solved in a manner worse than now achievable (at the same time, the strong version of the welfare state is now in crisis). And as I tried to emphasize, the social question will never be solved "for good". But the politics of class has traditionally rested on different premises and expectations than the satisfaction of particular grievances. The founding event of dynamic modernity, the French Revolution, desperately tried to preempt the emergence of class cleavages in the newly created free political order, for two reasons: the French revolutionaries feared that class conflicts would destroy political freedom and they regarded classes as emancipated vestiges of feudal estates. The two remedies, proposed by the first great statesmen of modernity, public happiness and national cohesion, have never left the political agenda of modernity, but they have never eliminated class conflict as the major field of political conflict. Marx gave a dialectical twist to this issue as well. On the one hand, his philosophically constructed proletariat, so different from the empirical working class, had to intensify its class existence and class separation; that was the royal road to victory. On the other, this class - more conscious of its class existence than any
prior to it was the last one in "prehistory". Following its predicted victory, a completely classless world would emerge. The grand narrative of the "end of classes" belongs to class politics to the same extent as the belief in the -politically, culturally and morally- salutary effects of self segregation, proposed to whole human groups; the belief in either one of them is now gone. Social actors are still very much in the habit of formulating their material interests in group terms, because this is the precondition of adding political clout to it. But the same actors no longer seem to believe that their collective co-existence should be anything else but a temporary demonstration of their common interests. Class culture is becoming a folkloristic curiosity; the educational revolution of mass democracy provides people across classes with the same culture (or pseudo-culture). Nor is there, after the tremendous fiasco of communism, any belief left in a "classless" society; the lifestyle of the nomenklatura told a story to the rest of the world which was almost as disheartening as that of the political terror.

The transition from class politics to "biopolitics", to a political agenda whose main items are race or ethnicity, gender or sex, as well as environmental issues, is a change of vocabulary only in part. Partially this transition is indeed tantamount to "translation"; for example, the dangers implicit in the existence of a too huge underclass or subproletariat can also be rendered as a race issue. But for the most part, "biopolitics" has claims which are widely different from those of class politics. Marx regarded as the major historical merit of capitalism that it was a "purely social" society in which neither birth (genetic contingency) nor any other "natural" factor defined the human hierarchy which was a purely social creation. (Therefore "only" society had to be radically changed for "human emancipation" to be achieved). For "biopolitics", this purely social character of capitalism (or modernity) transpires as the tyranny of an abstract rationalism which eliminates the special human quality written in the body. As Foucault put it, the body is here in the prisonhouse of the soul. Further, class struggle in capitalism was understood by Marx, as Merleau Ponty so correctly observed, as a singular kind of violence which puts an end to violence, as rational violence which proceeds toward discourse, which is the self-understanding of the proletariat, and in this sense a partial elimination of unreason from history. By contrast, bio-politics stresses the importance of the "mini-discourse", the inscrutability and intranslatability of the Other, the special (gender or radical) "epistemology", up to the point of a genetic incommunicado. There can be no doubt that the present phase is a fall-out of a dual and major revolution, of the self-emancipatory process of women and of those races who had to passively endure the ruthlessly assimilationist drive of a universalist culture. But in its present form, it is a serious threat to modernity in a twofold sense. First, it is so because of its unintended dialectic. While it rightly stresses that as long as, for example, violence against women is a routine part of our culture, modernity cannot be
regarded as emancipated, the "bio-location" of its vocabulary generates of itself excessive violence. Modernity has developed mechanisms, mostly under the influence of liberalism and its procedural - legalistic spirit which sublimates violence partly into culture, partly into the two "tamed" subsystems of economy and the law. Once these mediations are swept away for being too universalistic and thus oppressive (or if they are merely used as tools of a power politics), if conflict-solving reverts to a body-to-body immediacy, one of the few items in regard of which modernity represents "progress" (gains without corresponding losses) can be eliminated.

The second deeply problematic aspect of biopolitics is its contribution to the further decline of rationality in politics. The politics of modernity has been in some sense wedded to rationality; one of its major claims was to render the "irrational" institutions and principles of medieval politics into rationalized ones. The result was, especially in the first half of this century, more than doubtful. In Fascist politics, Reason (and its own mythology) was replaced by the explicit myths of Unreason, of blood, race, the Soil, blind obedience, a pagan and necrophile charisma. In communism, a "more dialectical" story has unfolded. Initially, the communist theory - in its peak performance, Luckacs' *History and Class Consciousness* - made the claim that political reason in its "right version", (the "correct consciousness of the proletariat") will solve all those problems that had remained unsolved by classic German philosophy from Kant to Hegel. The proletariat and its vanguard, being able to penetrate the "reified" crust of social processes, will grasp, precisely as a political actor, the concrete qualities of things, and thereby abolish the thinglike character of human processes, thus overcome the barrier of the Thing-in-itself. This almost orgiastic excess of rationalist self-confidence was rightly punished by that total incomprehension with which communists are now watching the crumbling of their world, by the closing of the communist mind. But we have barely recovered from this extravaganza of extreme irrationalism and hyper-rationalism when the genetic (racial or sexual) incommunicado already threatens the slender beginnings of building rational and domination-free communication.

It is in this context that the *political* significance of *culture* for the post-modern political condition can be grasped. The yield of the post-modern inventory of modern politics is a thorough-going revision, the elimination of excesses and the adjustment to what the modern arrangement can really endure. This is a necessary task that puts an end to the totalitarian nightmare, to the mindless use of other oppressive potentialities of the modern world; but the end result is not exactly uplifting. Insofar as post-modern politics emanates from the state, it appears as the politics of managerial expertise; insofar as it emanates from society, it transpires sometimes as worthy public activity (this is the concept of "civil society"), but quite often as outright mob rivalry and infight, frighteningly resembling New York politics as it has been depicted by Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. What is consistently missing from it
is the slightest degree of grandeur. The disconsolating sight of post-modern politics, as it is practiced in ever wider areas of the world, will not generate enthusiasm of any kind, will not render meaning to anyone’s life. At the same time, around the end of the century which had brought the experience of the Holocaust and the GULAG into our world, no intellectual with the minimum of moral and social responsibility can dream about the “aesthetically electrifying” politics of violence and destruction. Mass democracy, as we now know it, is the sole option we have, not because of its intrinsic excellence but because of the impossibility of choosing its other. And this is clearly an impasse.

Consolation can come from the direction which always served as source of inspiration for those to whom freedom was an absolute: from the memory of the grandeur of Greek liberty. Let us not think for once of Pericles, as he appears on Thucydide’s pages, of the Athenian constitution, of Marathon and Thermopylae, but of the Greek tragedy and philosophy. For Greek freedom, tragedy and philosophy, culture in general, was politically constitutive not in the narrow sense of political allusions in the verses of the poets, the references in philosophical dialogues. Culture created an elite which was not a power elite, not a hierarchy created by remuneration, but by being universally revered or coveted. This elite, in its very being, constituted a hierarchy of values, displayed the degrees which separate noble from base, high from low, without introducing social subordination. It gave an interpretation, beyond the merely political, of “high” or “noble”, which was the free acceptance (the appropriation by one’s own free deed) of the “treacherous” whimsical character of human existence which philosophy attempted to rationalize and whose ultimate rationality this twin-sister of philosophy, tragedy, thoroughly queried and graphically denied. But both philosophy and tragedy emphasized in their very being that only the Greek, that is the free citizen in his free city, was capable of creating both philosophy and tragedy.

The political question, so crucial for the post-modern condition, is whether it will ever generate the cultural surplus by which post-modern politics will find its twin-sister of cultural creation. Facing the day-to-day exigencies of public life, the often terrifying misery of so many people in so many areas of the world, this precondition seems to be ethereal, the parasitic concern of the aesthete for the “style” of politics. However, this train of thought has been guided throughout by the conviction that while the politics of modernity had to be purged of its poisonous delusions of grandeur, without a new alliance of politics and culture the fate of modernity still hangs in the balance, the question of “Can modernity survive?” remains unanswered.