

The Sociological Relevance of Taylor's *A Secular Age*

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- I am not a philosopher. I am a sociologist. I am going to concentrate in my presentation on the sociological relevance of Taylor's *A Secular Age*
- The larger significance of the work resides in the fact that it has forced not only philosophers, but theologians, social scientists and historians to rethink our conceptions of the modern secular world
- The sociological relevance of *A Secular Age* rests on three dimensions:
 - I.- It offers the best genealogical account of the long-term historical processes of secularization that culminate in our secular age
 - II.- Its focus on phenomenological experience, on the conditions of belief and unbelief, opens up new possibilities for a comparative historical analysis of processes of secularization which can better account for divergent religious and secular outcomes in different contexts
 - III.- The globalization of the immanent frame offers a more flexible framework for the conceptualization of multiple modernities than traditional sociological theories of functional differentiation
- Let me elaborate on each of these three propositions

I.- Taylor's Rich and Complex Genealogical Account

- *A Secular Age* offers the best analytical, phenomenological and genealogical account we have of our modern secular condition
- Analytically, it explains with distinct clarity the structural interlocking constellation of the cosmic, social and moral orders that constitute the self-sufficient immanent frame within which we are constrained to live and experience our lives, secular as well as religious
- All three orders, the cosmic, the social, and the moral are understood as purely immanent secular orders, devoid of transcendence, and thus functioning *etsi Deus non daretur*
- This phenomenological experience constitutes our age paradigmatically as a secular one, irrespective of the extent to which people living in this age may still hold religious or theistic beliefs
- Phenomenologically, Taylor explores the changes in the “conditions of belief” and in the “pre-ontological” context of understanding
- In order to explain the change from a Christian society around 1500CE when belief in God was unchallenged, "naïve" and taken for granted, to a post-Christian society today in which belief in God becomes increasingly problematic
- Phenomenologically, the anthropocentric change in the conditions of belief that accompanies the emergence of modern secular self-sufficient humanism is experienced as a process of maturation and growth, as a "coming of age" and as progressive emancipation
- Modern unbelief is not simply a condition of absence of belief, nor merely indifference. It is a historical condition that requires the perfect tense, "a condition of 'having overcome' the irrationality of belief."
- This experience serves to ground our modern immanent “stadial consciousness”

- Quoting Taylor:
“This powerful understanding of an inescapable impersonal order, uniting social imaginary, epistemic ethic, and historical consciousness, becomes one of the (in a sense unrecognized) *idées forces* of the modern age”
- For that very reason, all analytical and phenomenological accounts of modernity are irremediably also grand narratives, indeed are always embedded in some genealogical account
- Taylor’s rich and complex genealogical account is written in conscious opposition to the post-modern illusion of being able to free ourselves from grand narratives
- The superiority of Taylor’s account rests in its ability to integrate successfully the valid insights of the competing genealogical accounts
- The genealogical accounts of modernity can be grouped into four basic types:
 - 1) The triumphant secularist and anthropocentric progressive stories of enlightenment and emancipation of the secular spheres from religion. The soviet museums of atheism serve as radical illustration
 - 2) The inverse negative philosophies of history, counter-Enlightenment narratives, and Catholic traditionalist defenses of a lost normative age
 - 3) The self-congratulatory post-millennial identifications of Western modernity and Christian civilization that tend to interpret secular modernity as a process of internal secularization and progressive institutionalization of Christian principles and norms
 - 4) Their opposite Nietzschean-derived critical genealogies of modernity which question the legitimacy of the modern secular age and its disciplinary and civilizing project precisely because of its bastard Christian lineage
- Taylor acknowledges and incorporates the valid insights of each of those accounts but faults them for their partial one-sided focus and uni-directional teleology

- Secularist genealogies of modernity are versions of what Taylor calls “subtraction theories.” The assumption that the secular is the natural anthropological substratum that is revealed when the super-structural addition of religion is lifted
- Secularist accounts that view unbelief as the simple result of scientific progress and rational inquiry, which naturally undermine religious worldviews, are blind to the Christian roots of the process of secularization, to the repeated Christian dynamics of disciplinary inner-worldly transformation and to the Christian moral energies which have fed much of the process of modern reform
- Taylor also wants to distance his account from "Catholic Intellectual Deviation stories" and from all Protestant identifications of modernity as Christian
- Intellectual genealogies leave out the entire Reform Master Narrative, which is central to Taylor’s account
- Reform actually begins within Latin Christendom well before the Protestant Reformation and is identified with “the thrust to complete the Axial revolution”
- For Taylor, “Reform not only disenchant, but disciplines and re-orders life and society”
- The sanguine identification of Protestant Christianity and modern civilization rightly points to the close connection between Christian Reformation and all modern processes of disciplinary and civilizing reform
- Without a phenomenological account of the sources and motives for the anti-Christian anger, which is so evident in the Enlightenment critique of religion and is so central to radical versions of modern secular humanism, no genealogical account of the secular age can be fully convincing

- Taylor's narrative pays equal attention to the "invaluable gains" and the "grievous losses," the Christian self-mutilation, and the homogenizing conformity which accompanies the triumph of secularity and of the immanent frame.
- Wary of all narratives of simple, cost-free suppression and supersession
- "No place for unproblematic breaks with a past which is simply left behind us"
- The "immanent Counter-Enlightenment," grounded in neo-Nietzschean critiques of modernity, offers a revolt against the allegiance to the moral order and the affirmation of ordinary life that exclusive humanism inherited from the Christian tradition
- This rebellion against the exclusive humanism of modern culture gives primacy to the aesthetic and involves a new valorization of death and at times of violence.
- It also rejects all ontically-grounded understandings of transcendence and therefore serves to further reinforce the immanent frame
- Nietzschean-derived genealogical accounts of Western modernity
- Such as K. Loewith's critique of modern philosophies of history as secularized Christian eschatology or
- C. Schmitt's critique of modern political categories as secularized Christian theological concepts
- In turn provoke passionate defenses of the legitimacy of the modern secular age and its exclusive humanism, as in Blumenberg's thesis of human self-assertion
- Which in turn provoke the spirited defense of Christian apologists who see the superiority of Christianity and Christian civilization precisely in its virtuous association with secular modernity

- Which in turn provoke the critiques of Christian or Aristotelian traditionalists and so on in circular fashion
- Taylor's complex genealogical account is able to cut through the whole debate, indeed to transcend it, recognizing valid insights and uncritical blindness in each of the positions
- The polemic responses serve as illustration of the kind of de-stabilization which is built into the contingent historical process of secularization

II.- Diverse Phenomenological Experiences of the Institutionalization of the Immanent Frame

- The very first paragraph of *A Secular Age* refers to "the 'we' who live in the West, or perhaps Northwest, or otherwise put, the North Atlantic world -- although secularity extends also partially, and in different ways, beyond this world"
- This paragraph raises two important questions for a comparative analysis of secularization:
 - a) Is the phenomenological experience of belief and unbelief similar across the North Atlantic world?
 - b) Is the phenomenological experience of secularity beyond the West similar to the Western phenomenological experience
- While Taylor's own analysis does not take such a direction, his phenomenological approach offers a way of explaining what used to be called "American exceptionalism" and now is increasingly viewed as "European exceptionalism"

- Both point to the radical bifurcation in the religious situation today between Western societies on both sides of the North Atlantic, that is, between the radical secularity of European societies and the predominant condition of religious belief in the United States
- The question can also be reformulated as that of the relation between Taylor's "secularity 3" and "secularity 2," that is, between the pre-ontological phenomenological conditions of belief and the actual empirical phenomenological experience of belief among ordinary people
- Traditional sociological theories of secularization explained the decline of religious belief, that is, secularity 2, as a quasi-natural outcome of processes of modernization without any phenomenological mediation
- In fact sociological theories tend to explain what David Martin has termed "nouns of process" such as "secularization" by reference to other nouns of process such as "modernization," "rationalization," "urbanization," "individuation" etc.
- Similar processes of modernization are supposed to produce similar secularization results quasi-automatically without the need for any other mediation
- Taylor's analysis offers a way of taking into account the diverse phenomenological experiences connected to similar processes of modernization.
- A reformulation of Taylor's Durkheimian theory of stages of social integration could serve to offer a convincing sociological explanation of American exceptionalism
- **If** the European secularist stadial consciousness is actually linked to the historical phenomenological experience of having progressed from a paleo-Durkheimian confessional Christian dispensation to a neo-Durkheimian national-secular one

and

- **If** becoming secular in Europe means becoming "unchurched" or de-confessionalized by giving up membership or at least active participation in "the church,"
- This may explain why Americans generally lack such a secularist stadial consciousness
- While Europeans tend to identify being "modern" with being secular, Americans tend to identify being "modern" with being religious
- People in the United States did not have to overcome either the established ecclesiastical institutions or the paleo-Durkheimian conditions of belief of the old European ancient regimes
- The United States were born as a brand new modern secular republic
- Its very foundation coincides with "the age of mobilization" in the sense that religious mobilization and political mobilization are simultaneous and co-foundational in the Christian secular republic
- Consequently, the American Enlightenment and the American civil religion are devoid of the kind of anti-Christian animus which permeates Taylor's genealogical account of exclusive humanism
- The United States did not need to undergo a process of secularization of its political structures and therefore the secular nature of the state is taken for granted as a "natural" phenomenon and not as the outcome of a process of emancipation from a prior paleo-Durkheimian "religious" stage
- The Christianization of the American people did not take the form of enforced "confessionalization" as in Europe, but rather that of evangelical "denominationalism"
- Unlike confessional "churches," pluralist voluntary religious "denominations" already share the modern social imaginary and the basic organizing framework of democratic nations, free markets, and media publics, namely that of being voluntary aggregations of individuals pursuing freely their interests

- This explains the naturalness with which large proportions of Americans tend to "switch" religious denominations, while the only significant change in religious affiliation in European societies is that of becoming "unchurched"
- Most relevant is the fact that Americans did not need to undergo a process of de-confessionalization in order to enter "the age of authenticity," the third stage in Taylor's stadial model, which corresponds most closely to the phenomenological conditions of belief in a secular age
- In the United States, at least in the sphere of religion, the Age of Authenticity was already present and operative in the Second Great Awakening
- and
- In the myriad utopian communities and radical spiritual experiments in all directions, which Jon Butler has appropriately and suggestively characterized as "the spiritual hothouse of Ante-Bellum America"
- Modern Americans, at least since Independence, appear to have been "awash in a sea of faith" (J. Butler)
- If Taylor's stage theory of "paleo" "neo" and "post" Durkheimian social orders does not seem to fit the historical experience of the United States, this could also account for the absence of an stadial historical consciousness that views unbelief as the quasi-natural developmental result of a kind of secular coming of age and of adult maturation
- Without the stadial consciousness of the superiority of unbelief one also may lack the ratchet effect of the antropocentric shift to exclusive humanism
- The nova and supernova effects of the age of authenticity appear to have been operative in the United States from its very beginning, but only to multiply to the nth degree the myriad options of belief rather than those of unbelief

- Instead of viewing American patterns as “exceptional,” one may turn the table on European theories of American “exceptionalism” which assume that European developments are the norm
- It is the unique historical process of secularization of Latin Christendom which appears to be truly exceptional and unlikely to be reproduced anywhere else in the world with the same phenomenological stadial consequences
- European secularity, one could argue, is the price that European Christianity had to pay in order to institutionalize the secular immanent frame or in the words of Marcel Gauchet, to “exit from religion”
- It is an open question which types of phenomenological experiences, religious as well as secular, accompany the process of institutionalization of the immanent frame in the rest of the world
- No need for a theory of European “exceptionalism” which assumes that secularity is a singular European phenomenon, unknown in the rest of the world, other than among Westernized elites, so that the global condition is supposed to be one of de-secularization of the world and widespread religious revival (P. Berger)
- It is an open question when and where processes of modernization are accompanied by irreligious secularity, as in Europe, and when are they accompanied by patterns of religious and secular pluralization, as in the United States

III.- The Globalization of the Secular Immanent Frame: Diverse Religious Dynamics and Multiple Modernities

- The particular historical pattern of Western Christian secularization became globalized not through processes of functionalist differentiation but through the equally particular historical process of European colonial expansion
- The process of European colonial expansion encountered not only so-called “primitive” pre-axial cultures, but also other post-axial civilizations with very different social imaginaries and their own established patterns of reform, in accordance with their own particular axial civilizational principles and norms
- The outcomes that will result from these long historical dynamics of intercivilizational encounters, conflicts, borrowings, accommodations and *aggiornamentos*, change across time and from civilization to civilization
- The very pattern of Western secularization cannot be fully understood if one it ignores the crucial significance of the colonial encounter in European developments
- Even much of the master reform process of medieval Christianity and the renaissance and recovery of the memory of classical civilization as an integral part of the collective European past, are not fully intelligible without taking into account the encounter with, and the many borrowings from Islam
- Any comprehensive narrative of the modern civilizing process must take into account the Western European encounter with other civilizations. The very category of civilization in the singular only emerges out of these inter-civilizational encounters
- Any discussion of secularization as a global process should start with the reflexive observation, that one of the most important global trends is the globalization of the Western Christian category of “religion” and of the binary classification of reality, “religious/secular,” which it entails

- In a sense today the secular immanent frame has become globalized, at least certain aspects of the cosmic order through the globalization of science and technology, certain aspects of the institutional social order of state, market and public sphere, and certain aspects of the moral order through the globalization of individual human rights
- But the globalization of the modern secular immanent always happens as an interactive dynamic transformation and refashioning of pre-existing non-Western civilizational patterns and social imaginaries in conjunction with Western modern secular ones
- Moreover, in the same way as "our" modern secular age is fundamentally and inevitably post-Christian
- The emerging multiple modernities in the different post-axial civilizational areas are likely to be post-Hindu, or post-Confucian, or post-Muslim
- Modernization does not amount simply to a replacement of tradition by secular modernity, but it entails rather a modern refashioning and transformation of already existing civilizational patterns and social imaginaries
- Comparisons of secular Europe and religious America or the evidence of religious revivals around the world make clear that within the same secular immanent frame one can encounter very diverse religious dynamics
- A comparison of Quebec and Brazil, two post-confessional post-Catholic societies illustrate the same dual divergent pattern
- Up to the 1960's, Quebec had been a homogeneous confessional Catholic society, arguably the region with the highest levels of religious belief and practice not only in Canada but in all of North America.
- In one single generation, as a consequence of "the quiet revolution," Quebec underwent a drastic process of secularization. State, nation, and the population of Quebec were de-confessionalized

- Religious practice and affiliation plummeted and today Quebec is arguably the most secularized region of North America.
- A population which had been previously homogeneously Catholic had become in short order homogeneously secular and post-Catholic
- As in Western Europe, the only dynamic of religious pluralism was brought in by the new immigrants
- Since the 1960's Brazil has experienced its own quiet secular revolution. Brazil has also ceased being a confessional Catholic society
- But de-confessionalization of state, nation and population has not led to drastic homogeneous secularization but rather to an explosion of religious pluralism of all kinds
- Brazil remains the largest Catholic society and a dynamic center of global Catholicism. But simultaneously it has become a dynamic center of global Pentecostalism and a dynamic global center for the transformation of Afro-American religions
- Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's global cities, exhibit increasingly pluralist religious dynamics. One finds side by side divergent Catholic trends from liberation theology to thriving charismatic communities, divergent Protestant trends from the historical denominations to Mormons, Jehovah Witness, Pentecostal churches and Neo-Pentecostal mega-churches, Afro-Brazilian movements such as *Umbanda and Candomblé*, new Amer-Indian religious movements, and immigrant diasporas communities of all kinds, as well as new Brazilian syncretic cults
- While Brazil may be an extreme case, one can observe similar processes of religious pluralization throughout Latin America
- Moreover, a global comparative look at post-colonial global cities throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America would seem to indicate that the 'new world' paradigm of religious innovation and pluralization appears more adequate and fruitful than the old European paradigm of secularization and religious decline

- Indeed, the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) and other emergent socio-economic powers such as South Africa are all characterized by diverse patterns of religious pluralism
- The modern “secular-religious” system of classification that emerged out of the transformation of Western Christianity and which we tend to characterize as a process of secularization has now become globalized, entering in dynamic transformative interaction with all non-Western systems of classification, pre-axial as well as axial
- All the religio-cultural systems, Christian and non-Christian, Western and non-Western are now being transformed through these global interactive dynamics
- To a certain extent, one can understand this process as the global expansion of the secular immanent frame
- In this respect, not only the so-called “secular” societies of the West but the entire globe is becoming increasingly more secular and “disenchanted”
- The disenchantment of the world does not entail necessarily the disenchantment of consciousness, the decline of religion or the end of magic
- On the contrary, it is compatible with all forms of re-enchantment and religious revival
- The paradox is that the globalization of the Western secular-religious regime leads not to the exit from religion but rather to all kinds of novel religious transformations
- Indeed, what characterizes the contemporary global moment is not only the fact that all forms of human religion, past and present, from the most "primitive" to the most "modern" are available for individual and collective appropriation

- Equally relevant is that fact that increasingly they must learn to coexist side by side in today's global cities
- This contemporary social fact tends to put into question all teleological schemes of religious rationalization and development which tended to place "primitive" and "traditional" forms of religion as older human cultural forms to be superseded by more modern, secular, and rational ones
- Paradoxically, with its institutionalization first in the West and with its ensuing globalization, the secular immanent frame becomes the very guarantor of the post-axial secular/religious system which guarantees the equal, non-hierarchic free exercise of religion to all forms of religion, pre-axial, axial and post-axial
- The sacralization of human rights and the sacralization of the right of each and all individuals to religious freedom serves as the constitutive principle of such a post-axial global pluralist religious system