Modernity as an Age of Transition

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The Bahá’í writings describe the modern period as an age of transition toward a future world civilization that manifests the oneness and essential diversity of humankind. The “world’s equilibrium,” Bahá’u’lláh writes, has been “upset” by the “vibrating influence” of “this most great, this new World Order.” The Universal House of Justice further elaborates upon Bahá’u’lláh’s remarks by likening these disruptive transformations to the period of adolescence: “Humanity, it is the firm conviction of every follower of Bahá’u’lláh, is approaching today the crowning stage in a millennia-long process which has brought it from its collective infancy to the threshold of maturity—a stage that will witness the unification of the human race. Not unlike the individual who passes through the unsettled yet promising period of adolescence, during which latent powers and capacities come to light, humankind as a whole is in the midst of an unprecedented transition. Behind so much of the turbulence and commotion of contemporary life are the fits and starts of a humanity struggling to come of age. Widely accepted practices and conventions, cherished attitudes and habits, are one by one being rendered obsolete, as the imperatives of maturity begin to assert themselves.” 1 This essay explores the idea of modernity as an age of transition as presented in the Bahá’í writings. 2

The origins of the modern age of transition

The modern age of transition begins as a movement out of the medieval order of civilization, some prominent expressions of which include the Song Dynasty of imperial China (960-1279 CE), the Hindu-Islamicate society of Mughal India (1526-1857 CE), the Mali Empire of West Africa (1235-1670 CE), and orthodox-Christian Byzantium (286-1453 CE). Each of these medieval societies relied upon a material substrate of village-based agrarian activity. These agrarian villages were, in turn, ruled by a cadre of urban elites whose authority was thought to hierarchically descend from the divinely sanctioned powers of a single emperor or king. Both social layers were, in turn, embedded

in a common religious-metaphysical system, among which those associated with Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Neo-Confucianism were concurrently preeminent. And although by around 1250 CE, certain Old World elites had established a meaningful web of Afro-Eurasian interconnections, each medieval society still largely continued to consider itself civilizationally autonomous. 3

Precisely how and when the medieval order began to decline is a matter of scholarly debate. What is clear, however, is that the upheavals of the "long nineteenth century"—from roughly 1770 to 1920—inaugurated the modern age of transition by firmly uprooting the foundations of medieval civilization. The advent of industrial manufacturing undermined the agrarian, village-based substrate of medieval life by unleashing the explosive powers of fossil fuels, mechanical technology, and megapolitan urbanization. Populist revolutions in the United States (1765-1791), France (1789-1799), and Haiti (1791-1804) stimulated novel vectors of political change that would, by the middle of the twentieth century, help topple most of the world's great monarchical empires. The spreading influence of secular and materialistic ideologies disrupted the taken-for-granted authority of long-established ecclesiastical institutions and religious creeds. And a succession of pathbreaking transportation and communication technologies, including the steamboat (1803), the locomotive (1804), electric telegraphy (1844), the petrol automobile (1886), broadcast radio (1896), and the airplane (1903), overwhelmed medieval notions of civilizational autonomy by dramatically interlinking the far-flung regions of the earth. One by one, then, each of the established pillars of medieval civilization were decisively displaced during the long nineteenth century. 4

An era of ideological frustration

The upheavals of the long nineteenth century aroused a gusty season of intellectual commotion and ferment. How, every attentive mind began to wonder, should a just, peaceful, and prosperous society be structured if not by the age-old medieval pillars of village-based agrarianism, monarchical empire, and ecclesiastical religion? Given the outsized influence that, at the time, European and North American peoples enjoyed, many intellectuals attempted to answer this question by presenting certain impressive features of modernizing Western societies—their pursuit of rational self-determination; their relentless strivings for scientific and technological progress; their expanding commitments to democratic politics and the self-correcting dynamism of free markets; their burgeoning schemes of political-economic equalization; or even their nationalistic enthusiasms—as the crucial foundations of a new, modern order of civilization that all peoples must eventually embrace.

The Western-centric inquiries of nineteenth-century thinkers yielded a constellation of influential ideologies—including liberalism; capitalism; socialism; nationalism; anarchism; secular humanism; scientific materialism; organicism; techno-utopianism; and enlightened despotism—that illuminated certain real features of the modern age of transition. Yet these ideologies also each employed so many problematically one-sided and parochially

self-centered assumptions that subsequent efforts to enact their claims ended up lurching back and forth between moments of encouraging progress and of demoralizing frustration. One thinks, for example, of how the efforts of revolutionary France to politically enact the ideals of liberty, equality, and solidarity were swiftly followed by the authoritarian repressions of the Reign of Terror and the Napoleonic regime. Or one could also mention how endeavors to demonstrate the universal validity of modern science, advanced by such thinkers as Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and August Comte (1798-1857), helped to stimulate a encouraged new constellation of obscuring materialistic orthodoxies.

Noting these difficulties, long-nineteenth-century thinkers strove to remedy the many defects that plagued their cherished modern ideologies in at least three broad ways. First, there were those who, like J.W.F. Goethe (1749-1832), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Karl Marx (1818-1883), and Walt Whitman (1819-1892), claimed that humanity could only continue proceeding down the path of modern progress by more consistently or radically embracing the ideals of the Enlightenment, particularly those of freedom, equality, and rationality. Second, many others advanced the countervailing claim that redressing the ideological failings of Western modernity required revitalizing one or another of humanity's great pre-modern traditions; consider, for example, of the efforts of Friderich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Søren Kierkegaard (1817-1855), and the architects of the Meiji Restoration, respectively, to re-engage the ethos of Homeric polytheism, of early Christianity, and of Japanese Shintoism. And third, one encounters an expanding cohort of voices who, in the manner of a Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) or Max Stirner (1806-1856), suggested that a more ideal society could emerge only after the West's moral-ideological pretensions had been firmly subverted and exposed. The intellectual landscape of the long nineteenth century was, therefore, cross-pressured by efforts to show how the crucial defects of Western modernity could be resolved by more comprehensively embracing Enlightenment ideals, or by revitalizing some premodern ethico-spiritual tradition, or by critically vitiating the dark side of modern Western civilization.

Much has obviously taken place since the close of the long nineteenth century, including such world-shaking events as the Great Depression; the Second World War; the nuclear proliferations of the Cold War; decolonization and the third wave of nation-state formation; the "Big Push" of international development; the formation of the United Nations; the establishment of the international human rights regime; the rising global clout of East and South Asian societies; the digital revolution; and the accelerating trajectory of anthropocentric climate change. And yet, dominant intellectual discourses—especially in the West—continue to swirl within the same limited horizon of ideological possibilities that crystallized between 1770 and 1920. Indeed, despite the impressive advancements in knowledge that have taken place during the century, many among our most prominent thinkers continue to assume that, if contemporary humanity is ever to address its mounting civilizational woes, it must do so either by re-committing itself to the ideals of the Enlightenment, renewing its engagement with some older and ostensibly superior

tradition, or disruptively deconstructing the oppressive and disingenuous foundations of modern Western civilization.

The analogy of collective adolescence

The age of transition thesis discloses a new horizon of interpretive possibilities. It recasts the tumultuous vectors of modern thought and social change as the initial expressions of a still-unfolding process of global-civilizational transformation that can be likened to the collective adolescence of humankind. “The long ages of infancy and childhood through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background,” proclaims Shoghi Effendi, who served as the administrative head of the Bahá’í Faith from 1921 to 1957, in a letter written several years before the outbreak of the Second World War. “Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood. Then will the human race reach that stature of ripeness which will enable it to acquire all the powers and capacities upon which its ultimate development must depend.” Or again, as the Universal House of Justice explains, “the human race, as a distinct, organic unit, has passed through evolutionary stages analogous to the stages of infancy and childhood in the lives of its individual members, and is now in the culminating period of its turbulent adolescence approaching its long-awaited coming of age.” 5

This image warrants careful consideration. For individuals, the period of adolescence is marked by the rapid development of adult-like capabilities. Yet a mature framework within which to orient these new powers is initially lacking. The young person must struggle to clarify the concepts, values, and identities upon which they will rely as they approach the threshold of adulthood. This is an immensely challenging task, and it is made even more difficult by the young person’s competing attachments to the well-known norms of childhood, burgeoning enamorments with their own mental and physical capabilities, and deepening uncertainties about the merits of different models of adult living. Indeed, it is precisely from the resultant sense of disorientation that arise the patterns of “turbulence,” “impetuosity,” and “vehemence” that are so consistently associated with the period of human adolescence.

When applied to the modern age of transition, the analogy of adolescence recasts the proliferating welter of modern ideologies, not as the expression of some unsurpassable state of social, political, and intellectual maturity, but rather as the chaotic yet promising outgrowth of humanity’s burgeoning abilities to envision a new era of a globally-integrated civilization. The analogy additionally encourages a long-term vision of social change that can enable successive generations to continue laboring to erect an organically transfigured world society. In this regard, one might consider the difference between the young person who, because they see themselves living only for

today, dissipates their energies in the pursuit of fleeting pleasures and enthusiasms, and another, who, by remaining more acutely aware of the looming imperatives of adulthood, conscientiously devotes themselves to undertakings that prepare them for what lies ahead.

The effort to analogically reconfigure one's narrative of history, moreover, helps clarify the crucial role that other analogies already play in shaping thought about modern history. Indeed, the very notion of enlightenment constitutes one such influential analogy, suggesting the ideals of banished illusion and of rationally clarified perception that have profoundly influenced the trajectory of modern Western culture and history. And one can also readily identify several other images—based, for example, on the model of atomic interaction, or on the naturally selective pressures of jungle life, or even on the operations of industrial factories and mechanical clocks—that continue to orient prevalent ideas about specific features of modern social existence. Consequently, instead of aspiring to supplant the ostensibly objective and neutral narratives of modernity that contemporary intellectuals employ with an unduly imagistic one, the age of transition thesis actually endeavors to transform the existing analogical contents of modern historical imagination.

Toward a new horizon of research and intellectual activity

If the age of transition thesis is to ever become widely influential, much more will be required than simply enumerating its various conceptual and interpretive merits. The idea must additionally be incorporated into a new and robustly advancing pattern of research and intellectual activity. To shed further light on how an expanding constellation of individuals, communities, and institutions might practically address this far-reaching challenge and opportunity, the author draws on his experience with a nascent research organization, the Center on Modernity in Transition. Before exploring this particular body of experience, however, it may be useful to offer some additional insight into the intellectual transformation that is being considered by briefly exploring the history of the modern research university.

The institution of the modern research university arose in Germany during the early nineteenth century, and is widely recognized as beginning with the founding of the University of Berlin in 1809. Unlike its medieval predecessors, such as the universities of Paris or Oxford, which functioned as scholastic guilds that pursued the ideal of orthodox intellectual integration, the modern research university was meant to advance intellectual endeavors that grew out of the novel idea of modernity as a dawning age of rational and scientific enlightenment. One major strategy that these universities employed was to situate the proliferating research activities that Enlightenment thinkers pursued within a handful of specialized disciplines and fields. As explained by the well-known Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the modern research university was to lead humanity further into the dawning Age of Enlightenment by managing "the entire content of learning … like a factory, so to speak—by a division of labor, so that for every branch of the sciences there would be a public teacher or professor appointed as its trustee, and all

of these together would form a kind of learned community called a university.” 6 The disciplinary order of knowledge that now orients our world thus arose within the efforts of modern research universities to systematically embed the idea of modernity as a dawning age of enlightenment in a new pattern of research and intellectual activity. By extension, it would seem reasonable to expect the mature development of the idea of modernity as an age of transition to entail at least an equally weighty and institutionally complex transformation in the intellectual life of humankind.

The writings of philosopher Imre Lakatos (1922-1974) further illuminate the actual process by which such an intellectual transformation might proceed. Specifically, Lakatos claims that every serious research endeavor relies upon a “hard core” of conceptual presuppositions that are never directly tested, but rather used to support an evolving “protective belt” of rigorously evaluated theories, propositions, and methodologies. For Lakatos, the main distinction between a scientific program of research and a non-scientific one lies not in the extent to which they respectively employ empirically unverified assumptions—both of them inescapably do—but rather in the degree to which their conceptual presuppositions sustain a progressively advancing system of secondary theories, propositions, and methodologies. Consequently, instead of endeavoring to conclusively demonstrate the veracity of the age of transition thesis before proceeding any further down the path of inquiry that the idea suggests, Lakatos’s arguments suggest that one must simply get started trying to use the idea to ground a new and robustly advancing program of research and intellectual activity. 7

In this regard, it may be useful to mention the nascent efforts of one research organization. the Center on Modernity in Transition (COMIT), with which the author has, since its establishment in early 2020, been energetically engaged. As the organization explains in a recent report, “the Center on Modernity in Transition aspires to contribute to the intellectual life of the emerging world civilization envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh. We begin from the premise that if one interrogates deeply enough the sources of humanity’s pressing challenges, one arrives ultimately at a network of concepts and assumptions that undergird the current order, and that shape the ways in which social reality is read, understood, and constructed. The broad aim of COMIT is thus to rigorously examine the intellectual foundations of modern society and to contribute, however gradually, to their transformation. COMIT pursues this goal by working to establish a new and dynamic research program animated by the idea of modernity as an age of transition toward a new world civilization—one characterized by unprecedented levels of unity, justice, peace, and material and spiritual prosperity.”

In support of its long-term, research-program-building agenda, the Center pursues two interrelated areas of activity. COMIT aspires to advance novel and distinctive lines of research that are rooted in the idea of modernity as an age of transition, as well as in the various fundamental concepts that underpin the idea. At the same time, however, the organization strives to contribute to

a growing number of academic discourses and fields that, in one way or another, help to illuminate various facets of the modern age of transition. Neither endeavor can, the Center maintains, be effectively pursued in isolation from the other. For without consistently engaging the best knowledge and methodologies that humanity has produced, COMIT's attempts to build a new research program would struggle to significantly improve upon the patterns of intellectual activity that operate within the world's leading research universities. Inversely, however, if the Centre focuses only on advancing the kinds of research that existing academic institutions pursue, it would soon find itself unable to meaningfully contribute to the establishment of a new and highly distinctive program of research and intellectual activity. COMIT thus aspires to advance both endeavors in a complementary and coherent manner.

A series of initial developments suggests the fecundity of COMIT's approach. Relevant examples include the establishment of fruitful collaborations with academic bodies at Duke University, New York University, and Columbia University; the successful execution of a number of online speaker series—for example, The Liberal Imaginary and Beyond and Identity and Belonging in a Global Age—featuring a line-up of highly distinguished thinkers and practitioners, including Charles Taylor, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Barbara Fields, Cornel West, Seyla Benhabib, and Craig Calhoun; the development of a maturing web presence, particularly the organization's webpage, comitresearch.org, and its YouTube channel, where video recordings of its events have been widely viewed; the raising of an initial tranche of funds to support the organization's expanding research activities and the hiring of personnel; the establishment of several dynamic, distinctive, and externally well-received research projects; and the cultivation of an expanding network of committed thought partners and research collaborators. Although the organization remains acutely aware of the many challenges it must face as its efforts continue to gain in complexity and scope, it continues to derive sustenance and hope from the demonstrated abilities of the age of transition thesis to invite the enthusiastic participation of scholars situated within a wide variety of disciplinary, intellectual, and ethico-spiritual traditions.

What this article suggests is that, today, there is a unique opportunity for motivated researchers to begin rigorously embedding the distinctive vision of modernity as an age of transition, such as it is presented in the Bahá'í writings, into new and far-reaching patterns of research and intellectual activity. The example of the Center on Modernity in Transition provides some insight into the kinds of evolving research activities that might help to tangibly advance the envisioned intellectual transformation. At present, however, the simple fact remains that we can have little real knowledge of the precise content or shape of this future intellectual efflorescence. It is precisely for this reason that the Bahá'í writings consistently encourage us to regard the welter of tumultuous forces that characterize the modern age of transition through the lens of the organic metaphor. "It is," as 'Abdu'l-Baha writes, "even as the seed: The tree exists within it but is hidden and concealed; when the seed grows and develops, the tree appears in its

fullness.” 8

Notes:

Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, www.bahai.org/r/581649978; Universal House of Justice, “A Letter to the Bahá’ís of Iran, Dated 2 March, 2013,” www.bahai.org/r/394327546.

Other sources develop resonant accounts of modernity as an age of transition. See, for example, such mid-twentieth century works as: Lewis Mumford, The Transformation of Man (New York: Harper & Row, 1956); Karl Jaspers, The Origin and Goal of History, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953); Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Human Phenomenon, ed. Sarah Appleton-Weber (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 1999). Or, more contemporaneously: Robert Wright, Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny, n.d.; Prasenjit Duara, The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Joseph Chan, Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

For useful descriptions of the medieval order of civilization see: Janet L. Abu-Lughod, Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-135 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Marshall G. S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, Volume 1: The Classical Age of Islam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 103–117; Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History, ed. Edmund III Burke (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 44–71; Mumford, The Transformation of Man, 81–94.

Jürgen Osterhammel, The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 47.

Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh, www.bahai.org/r/166959448; Universal House of Justice, The Promise of World Peace, www.bahai.org/r/562133059.

Immanuel Kant, “The Conflict of the Faculties (1798),” in Religion and Rational Theology, trans. Mary J. Gregor and Robert Anchor, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 247.

Imre Lakatos, The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Volume 1: Philosophical Papers (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

’Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions: www.bahai.org/r/771160088. The immediately pressing task before us is for an expanding constellation of individuals, communities, and institutions to begin boldly and systematically pursuing the myriad opportunities for serious intellectual transformation and growth that can be discerned within the immediate contexts of their lives and social milieus.

About the author: Benjamin Schewel is Co-Director of the Center on Modernity in

Transition (COMIT). He is author of the book, Seven Ways of Looking at Religion, published by Yale University Press in 2017, and is currently finishing a second book, Encountering the Axial Age, which will also be published by Yale University Press. He also co-edited, Religion and Public Discourse in an Age of Transition: Reflections on Baha'i Practice and Thought, which was published by Wilfrid University Press in 2018.

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