

PART THREE

MODERNITY: THE SERIAL REVOLUTION

I

Historians date the transition from 'medieval' to 'modern' Europe in the latter part of the fifteenth century. Yet the only reason advanced for doing so (according to one notable instance: the introduction to Volume I of the first edition of the Cambridge Modern History, published in 1902) is that of convenience. There are of course qualifications to be made. The chapter of the same volume which deals with the Renaissance itself opens with this sentence: "The Renaissance, in the largest sense of the term, is the whole process of transition in Europe from the medieval to the modern world". However, as a later authority has put it, the Renaissance was a process lasting three and a half centuries. "The past is not a Christmas pantomime, and seldom if ever deals in transformation scenes."¹

But however many qualifications one makes, the concurrence of such disparate events as the invention of moveable type, the voyages of da Gama and Columbus which opened up America, India and south-east Asia to conquest and commerce, and the Reformation within a single lifetime is itself enough to mark the transformation from medieval to modern. Indeed, in the very next paragraph of the same Introduction to the first volume of the Cambridge Modern History, it is also argued that "Anyone who works through the records of the fifteenth and sixteenth century becomes conscious of an extraordinary change of mental attitude, showing itself on all sides in unexpected ways." And, as if to substantiate the claim, 1500 is the date of the first occurrence of the word 'modern' itself in English usage.

Originally, the word 'modern' meant no more than up-to-date, or fashionable; but in common usage it came to be applied in wider, more significant, contexts: the latest architectural style, the latest in philosophy - or political ideas - or literary composition, and so on. By the eighteenth century, as historians turned more and more towards enquiry into the past, instead of recounting the stories and fables that had survived as texts for moral or political instruction, 'modern' became used as a term for an epoch of European history characterised by the 'progress of civilisation' which produced this series of novelties, by contrast with past epochs, labelled 'classical' (or 'ancient'), and 'medieval'.

'The progress of civilisation' - or simply 'progress' - stood for a cumulative, self-reinforcing process originating in Europe (Max Weber saw it as founded on rationality - a European speciality) which during the past two hundred years has spread so as to

¹ D.Hay, *The Italian Renaissance*, C.U.P., 2nd. edn., 1977, p.2.

transform the world in accordance with the selfsame programme. It is a programme which comprehends the advance of science and technology, the exploitation and mobilisation of human, technical and natural resources, the centralisation of political power and the growth of capital, the induction - through universal education - of all members of a society into literacy and - through representative government - of all its adult members into political participation.

Not surprisingly, the experience of the twentieth century has tended to undermine belief in 'the progress of civilisation', and 'modernisation' came to be preferred as a safely neutral term. 'Modernisation' preserved the original meaning of 'up-to-date' but applied it to a process of acculturation: the imitation of what was now accepted as modern. One implication read into this (by Descombes) is that the individuals or groups who invented whatever was regarded by others as 'modern' were not concerned with modernising. They were reformers or revolutionaries who sought, if anything, to bring things to the state to which they properly belonged, or in which they should have been conserved.² It is perhaps worth noting that the Renaissance and Reformation, with which 'modern history' begins, have always carried the same connotation; the scholars and artists of the Italian Renaissance saw themselves as restoring connections with the classical world of Greece and Rome that had been lost or eroded in the Middle Ages; and for Luther and his followers, the doctrine of salvation by faith alone meant simply returning to the truth of the gospel.

By the 1960's, the whole world was being treated as divided between 'developed' (modern) and 'developing' (modernising) countries. Subsequently, the same decade has come to represent another break-point, the onset of the intellectual cult of 'post-modernity,' representing the exhaustion of the values of progress, disenchantment with the dynamic of modernisation, or, in some cases, a crisis of self-doubt which resorts either to an all-embracing scepticism or to ransacking the past for ethical, intellectual or aesthetic supplies.

But, as terms like 'modern' and 'modernisation' themselves became out-of-date, the word 'revolution' has acquired an oddly compulsive attraction. This seems especially the case for English speaking historians, even if the 'Industrial Revolution' is a term coined by the French. The 'scientific revolution' of the seventeenth century is now well-established in American usage, as it is in English. Hitching an agricultural revolution on to the industrial revolution, as English historians did fairly early on, was a fairly obvious and unremarkable move, but then it was combined with the 'population explosion' of the eighteenth century as evidence of a 'vital revolution.' And over the past thirty years English historians have announced, in rapid succession, a fiscal revolution, launched in the 1660's, a commercial revolution (1680-1720), and a consumer revolution. (We also have had a Tudor revolution, this time in government, which was the work, it seems, of a single man: Thomas Cromwell.) Finally, there is Thomas Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions, which converts 'scientific progress' itself into a serial revolution.

² See V.Descombes, The Barometer of Modern Reason, O.U.P., 1993, p. 133.

True, the word 'revolution' does seem utterly inappropriate if one looks at some of the individual cases. Abolishing the tax-farming system and issuing government bonds hardly turned the political world of late seventeenth century England upside down; still less did it affect the structure of society. The same is true of the expanded facilities for credit which the new banking created. The significance of the new scientific outlook credited to the seventeenth century grew as it became more a thing of the past; at the time it was happening, it had far less impact on people's outlook, behaviour or relationships than, say, the discovery of America or the development of printing, neither of which seems to have qualified for the label. As the editors of *Revolution in History* observe, "the concept has been overworked, debased and almost done to death. By a process of the inflation of historians' vocabulary, what might formerly had been termed a 'shift', or a 'change', becomes a 'revolution' in the mind of the historian needing to win a place in the sun for his own specialized wedge of research."³

On the other hand, if one considers the total effect wrought by this rather incongruous clutch of profound changes in the political, social, economic, technological and cultural situation in different European countries and sees them as causally, or at least functionally, connected, then the revolutionary label does have some warrant. What they all did, of course, was to enlarge the range of possibilities in thought, action, or relationships. They brought about, or rather, testify to, nothing less than the remodelling of the whole set of relationships between man and the material world - relationships which bore on his religious beliefs, his well-being, and the range of knowledge and skill he could use as a resource - between the citizen and the state (which is identified more and more with government from now on), and between the individual and society - relationships which concerned duties, rights, trust, obligations, expectations, appetites, and needs.

What they also, and most obviously, did was to expand the range and enlarge the content of resources in material and social technology - and thus facilities for the opportunistic deployment of authority and of power in all its forms. The spectacular changes which ensued have earned the title of 'the European Miracle': the deliverance of Europe from the state of siege which it had endured for the greater part of the medieval millennium and its turn towards expansion, aggression and imperialism in its dealings with the rest of the world.

II

Since this whole book is built on, or out of, the work of historians, it follows that all the historical accounts that have been put to use come to hand embedded in the framework of ideas and categories which historians have developed for their own purposes. One consequence, which is virtually inescapable, is that there is a dividing-line between what are conventionally regarded as political history and economic history.

There are other consequences, and these I have tried to avoid, or at least to minimise their influence. To put it at its simplest, up to the end of the Middle Ages, there are few

³ R.Porter & M.Teich, *Revolution in History*, C.U.P., 1986, p.2.

problems about the way in which historians present the past - apart from those of teleology, and the invitation to prolepsis it carries with it, which are in constant attendance. For although it was customary for nineteenth century historians to assume it was proper, and possible, to trace the origins of the major political, economic and social organisations of modern European countries - parliamentary, legal, entrepreneurial, military, and communal - far back into the remote past until they were lost in the 'Dark Ages' or in Greek and Roman antiquity, most historians nowadays halt their search for the roots of 'modernity' in the later Middle Ages. This may be because classicists and medievalists, while mindful of the way in which the political situation may switch suddenly with a change of emperor or king or ruling group, have become more inclined to treat actions and events as occurring within a context of institutions, relationships, or regimes which are *sui generis*, peculiarly 'Greek,' or 'Roman,' or 'ancient,' or 'medieval' rather than 'pre-modern.' To be sure, the change of heart is hardly radical or comprehensive; to take one pertinent instance, medievalists, as Bruce McFarlane complained, are still much too ready to serve as 'King's Friends', to support royal power as the eventual cup-winner and kings as the founding fathers of the modern state. "To make the crown strong, to pulverize faction, that was virtue; the only vice was to be weak."⁴ In general, though, there are no great difficulties in the way of deriving the kind of presentation which has been aimed at in the first two parts of this book from the framework devised by classical and medieval historians.

Even so, while they may halt their search for the roots of the present in the past at what we still take to be the beginning of 'the modern age', the perspectives offered by most political (and some economic) historians whose accounts I have consulted do not seem to have changed very much from what they were. With some notable exceptions, historians of modern Europe have a tendency to seek out causal paths which follow a course - developmental, progressive, evolutionary - towards a destined end, which is, of course, the nation-state of today. (The same tendency can still affect even medievalists when they become, in McFarlane's words, 'much too royalist'). And this does make for problems. For although one way of arriving at an understanding of regimes, institutions, forms of organisation and power, the prevailing ethos, organised public order, or social order itself is to trace their origin and growth, it is another matter entirely to regard them as the outcome of some larger and ineluctable historical process, treating 'the course of history' as merely, or largely, the root system of the present. It flies in the face of one of the more fundamental of those maxims promulgated by Vico which the twentieth century has at long last decided to take seriously: 'Organisations (governments, regimes, etc.) must conform to the nature of the men and things organised.'

There are, too, questions to be raised about nationhood, which is also said to have had its beginnings in the sixteenth century. This was exceptionally - and startlingly - true for the Netherlands where, according to Geoffrey Parker, people already 'began to speak of their *patrie* or Fatherland, meaning their country, not their town or province', in the 1550's. This was no more than a few years after the 'Augsburg Transaction' of 1548 and the 'Pragmatic Sanction' of the following year had brought the United Provinces into being

⁴ K.B.McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, O.U.P., 1973, p.2.

out of a jumble of provinces and towns acquired by the Habsburg emperor, Charles V.⁵ But the hunt for any concept of the nation as a unit in other countries has to make do with what can be read into the utterances of those in authority and those who spoke for them, or to them. In Elizabethan England, the propaganda value of national feeling could be said to have been perceived and used to some effect, but it was tied very closely to the mystique of personal loyalty to the Queen. Even here, national feeling made only a sporadic appearance, usually at time of war or diplomatic conflict, when life or livelihood came under threat; and there is nothing new about xenophobia. It requires the eye of patriotic faith to discern the beginnings of a sense of the common people, along with aristocracy and clergy, bound together in a unity of greater significance than attached to corporate affiliations or to loyalties towards patrons and kinsfolk. The clearest expression of nationalism occurred when allied with religious belief, and here again its clearest expression took the form of persecuting, attacking, and demonstrating against the adherents of different faiths.

In addition to the modern state and national feeling, the beginnings of modern bureaucracy have (yet again) been read into the spread of royal justice and Roman law and the emergence, towards 1500, of strong rulers in France, Spain, northern Italy, Burgundy and England. True, the apparatus of monarchic rule and administration of justice developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was far more elaborate than what had gone before, but, even so, the machinery of government administration remained a ramshackle affair. Professor Aylmer felt obliged to raise the question of whether, even in 1630, "such a thing as 'the administrative system' existed" in England.⁶ It perched rather shakily some way above and apart from the realities of everyday life. The "bureaucracy" that Trevor-Roper, for instance, has read into the apparatus of Renaissance courts is best regarded as part of the 'politics of magnificence'. For people in general the role played by government was to irrupt unpredictably into the lives of individuals and to subject them and the social and economic and political ties between them to sudden changes of fortune.

So, one proceeds from now on with added caution.

III

Taken together, the 'serial revolution' seems altogether too complicated and confused to admit of description as a comprehensive process of change. Yet to treat the several different 'revolutionary' transformations which gave rise to the world we call 'modern' separately from each other is bound to do damage to the interrelated process as a whole. It is this very fact, in all probability, which has driven historians to seek one single general cause - technological, economic, social-psychological or cultural - for the whole process; but now that it seems widely accepted that no single causal path can be traced, the least unsatisfactory course is to bracket together sectional processes which have some conceptual compatibility.

⁵ See G. Parker, *The Dutch Revolt*, 1979, Penguin Books, p.33.

⁶ G.E.Aylmer, *The King's Servants*, Routledge & K.Paul, 1974, p.68.

But even such compatibility as exists for the whole periods we label 'medieval' and 'modern' has its limits. There are contradictory elements within the 'before' and the 'after' stages which have to be reckoned with. In the Middle Ages, men who revered piety and poverty founded monastic and other-worldly orders - which went on to accumulate vast landed property and enormous wealth. Men everywhere condemned usury - and built palaces and cathedrals out of borrowed money or the interest paid on it. They regarded the taking of oaths as the essential cement of contracts, alliances and subordination - and forswore them at the first opportunity. They were members of the congregation of the Church, equal with others - and maintained a hierarchy of power, authority, wealth and social standing by law and by force of arms. Then, after 1500 or thereabouts, one sees the emergence of claims to absolute sovereignty - along with the assertion of natural rights and claims for sectional interests; of puritanism - in Catholic as well as in Protestant countries; of piety - and of possessive individualism and the spread of venality and corruption in public life. Belief in scientific rationality and the onward march of 'progress' was countered by religious revivals and by political conservatives like Burke.

What I have done is to order the three Parts which follow in roughly chronological sequence, although the need for some thematic coherence makes for some overlap. They are meant to give some account of different aspects of the process, lasting the best part of four hundred years, which have been, or might well be, labelled 'revolutionary'. It is all, or very nearly all, a European affair, which begins in the last quarter of the fifteenth century and ends midway through the nineteenth century. Of course, both the scope and the number of aspects considered are fairly arbitrary choices. And the use of the term 'serial revolution' as a title for the whole is questionable, especially now that whether the Revolution of 1789 truly deserves the title has become a serious question posed by many, if not indeed most, historians.

There were nevertheless changes of a profound kind - in political systems, in cultural activity, in style of life, in religion, in the relationship of the countries of Europe to the rest of the world, and, above all, in the relationship of the individual to nature, to others and to himself - most of which seem to have reached a critical point within a generation or so either side of the year 1500.

An equally momentous turning-point at the end of the eighteenth century brought this period of monarchism and early capitalism to a close. From the American War of Independence and the French Revolution emerge the first nation states. Modern industrial capitalism is already visible as the prodigious child of the Industrial Revolution. And administrative systems constructed according to the principles of modern bureaucracy came to supply the essential structure of organisation for both the modern state and modern industrial capitalism.

There is also a break - a check - in continuity which made itself felt during the seventeenth century. Its most violent manifestations were the wars - the Thirty Years War in Germany, the Civil War in England, and the wars of the Fronde in France, which disrupted the three countries in the second quarter of the seventeenth century. It has been

labelled a 'general crisis' because it is seen as demographic and economic in origin, although mainly political and religious in manifestation. For the protagonists most deeply involved, however, it was above all constitutional.

Part III is concerned largely with the period stretching roughly from the last quarter of the fifteenth century to circa 1660.

IV

Even so far as mainstream political history is concerned, however, it is important to steer clear of what J.A.Vann has called "the linear constraints" which, until recently, historians have derived from the success story of the great monarchies of early modern Europe⁷. The lengthy and unresolved debate about the theory and practice of 'absolutist' monarchy has masked the equally debatable conception cherished by many historians of some all-embracing movement carrying each and every European country along the same path, although at different speeds, towards the centralised monarchic state.

There are altogether too many exceptions. The United Provinces and England are the most obvious, but assemblies in Wurtemberg and Mechlenburg managed to defeat the absolutist claims of their rulers, and assemblies - cathedral chapters, town councils, constitutionally organised estates - in other German territories proved strong enough to keep a restraining hand on their ecclesiastical or secular overlords. The territorial magnates of Poland, after first defeating and then enlisting (or rather, conscripting) the lower nobility (*szlachta*) in their support, reduced the monarchy to a virtual impotence from which it never recovered. Constitutional assemblies in the outlying possessions of the Kings of Spain like Catalonia and Naples kept going well into the eighteenth century.⁸ Even in France, the paradigmatic 'absolutist' monarchy, there were provincial estates or 'parlements' which remained centres of opposition and dissent and a thorn in the flesh of successive kings up to the Revolution.

In fact, the closer one looks, the less exclusively does the trend towards centralised autocracy dominate the history of early modern Europe. Monarchy was nowhere truly absolute, even in Prussia, where the great landowners in the eastern territories stood apart from and to some extent above the domination exercised in other regards by Frederick William and his son.

Centralisation may be identified more certainly as what has been called the 'institutionalisation' of power, which boils down to the invention of more and more administrative agents through whom authority could be exercised at a distance and in an impersonal way. But this cut both ways. The growth of a viable administrative apparatus owed much, as in the case of the Roman Empire, to the spread of literacy. But in modern Europe the selfsame factor was at work in the emergence and spread of the practice of

⁷ J.Vann, "New Directions of Study of the Old Reich", *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 58, Suppl., 1986, p.3

⁸ See H.G. Koenigsberger, "Monarchies and Parliaments in Early Modern Europe", *Theory and Society*, Vol. 5, 1978, pp.191-217.

airing and discussing public affairs, especially those affecting religion and politics, in private or in salons, taverns and coffee-houses, and other meeting places out of sight and hearing of government or its officials, discussions which, after the development of printing, were not only disseminated by letters, but fuelled by pamphlets, journals and books, ready to serve as nursery to movements of religious dissent and, eventually, to 'the political nation'.

Complications like these risk losing any attempt at presenting an explanatory account in terms of the causal sequences of narrative history in a serial, or spiral, set of causal relationships, most of which are in any case fairly problematical. However, while the mental set of causal explanation inherent in narrative history is indissociable from the subject matter of the sources I have used, what is being aimed at here is the interpretative understanding proper to social science of ways in which organisation and social order developed and affected each other. This, at all events, will have to serve as excuse for the selective approach to the whole set of problems and for the arrangement by chapters that I have adopted.

There are lines to be drawn, apart from those between the sovereignty and interests, political and economic history, and the theory and practice of absolutism. There is, in the first place, that version of the institutionalisation of power that affected what we can designate 'society', now that it is becoming separable from the state; in very general terms, it consisted in the erosion - or suborning - of the ethos of communality that prevailed in so many aspects of medieval life: social, economic and political. Then there is the distinction to be made between the staged performance of governmental administration and the goings-on back stage. And this, when combined with the account of the formal apparatus of government given in the first two chapters, calls for a further account of the formation, in England, of the 'political nation' and the mobilisation of interests into a combination strong enough to overthrow the monarchist regime. The emergence of the 'political nation' was much more slow and uncertain in France, until the eruption of the Revolution. In Germany, it merged with the *Aufklärung*, in its guise as a movement for cultural unification, and was eventually submerged under the spread of nationalism.