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A Symposium on Steven B. Smith's *Modernity and Its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow*

Joshua L. Cherniss, Teresa M. Bejan, Samuel Goldman, Susan Meld Shell, and Ryan Patrick Hanley, with a Response by Steven B. Smith

Steven B. Smith: *Modernity and Its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeois from Machiavelli to Bellow* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. 416.)

Introduction

Joshua L. Cherniss

Georgetown University

Steven Smith's *Modernity and Its Discontents* represents the fruit of decades of deep reflection on the achievements and vulnerabilities of modern thought, and of the world that it has generated and reflected. The book is immensely rich; its essayistic style and elegant writing convey complicated thoughts so smoothly that Smith's full achievement may be easy to miss. However, several significant leitmotifs emerge. One (adverted to in the subtitle) is the emergence of a distinctive bourgeois self and culture, marked by a new conception and practice of individuality. This bourgeois self is at once calculating and materialistic (in potentially spiritually impoverishing ways) and ambitious, adventurous, self-assertive, even heroic. It is also prone both to complacency and inner contradiction. Another is the growing power of a characteristically modern conception of reason—and a corresponding crisis of traditional authority, and a tendency to belittle or repress the wayward and irrational (which forcibly reasserts itself, to culturally fruitful and politically calamitous effect, in modernity's "discontents"). A third is what Smith identifies as the modern master-trope of progress—the belief that human society is amenable to constant, cumulative, and at least potentially limitless and lasting improvement, and the tendency to see history as reflecting such a process of improvement. In short, individualism, materialism, rationalism, and historical optimism are the hallmarks of modern, bourgeois life.

These themes recall Max Weber's account of modernity; and like Weber, Smith is alert to the disquiet at modernity's heart. Indeed at the center of his account is a dialectic of disquiet. For Smith, modernity is distinguished from other epochs by its self-consciousness—and a persistent dissatisfaction with itself. Smith divides the authors he discusses into two groupings, labeled "modernity" and "our discontents." This division, combined with the roughly chronological arrangement of authors, may suggest an antithesis to the modern master-thesis of progress: a story of decline, or at least the displacement of optimistic self-confidence by growing doubt. Yet Smith notes subtleties that qualify this broad picture, pointing to ambiguities, ambivalences, and fragility in modernity's early days, and sources of hope and renewal even in modernity's latter-day discontents.

In this Smith both seems to confirm, and complicates, another trope of modern thought, related to that of progress: the idea of epochal "age," the sense of historical moments as representing different moments of "youth" or "age" of a civilization. We may be wary of carrying this notion too far. But it plays an important role in both the conception of modernity and the discontent with it that Smith traces—and a complex one. Often (early) modernity's dynamism and confidence—or hubris—is associated with the energies of youth, in contrast to the "age" (reflecting either wisdom or senility, depending on the perspective) of the ancients. Yet, as Smith reminds us, there is an alternative narrative, advanced by Francis Bacon, in which it is the ancients who are "young" and the "moderns" who have reached maturity. For Bacon, this suggested an advantage on modernity's part; others have looked back longingly at what they perceived as the youthful vigor and purity of the ancient world (classical Greece in particular). The notion of modernity as "older" than the premodern world—and the sense that modernity itself has "aged" over time—raises the question, which grows in importance as Smith's narrative advances, of whether modernity's advance represents a gain in mature wisdom, or a decline into aged frailty.

Modernity is not just an epoch; it is a problem, a source of conflict, a subject of debate. This raises the question of where Smith stands between modernity and its discontents—a question that the responses to Smith that follow explore. Smith's position is complex, nuanced, and free of partisan rancor. Nevertheless, we may seek to discern Smith's commitment—and follow his own suggested approach in doing so. In an earlier book on Hegel, Smith quoted Iris Murdoch's remark that "it is always a significant question to ask of any philosopher: what is he afraid of?" Smith adds that "in the case of Hegel the answer would have to be division, diremption, and contradiction."[1] Smith does not identify his own reigning fears. But my own suspicion is that, perceptively sympathetic reader of Hegel though he may be, Smith's

[1]Steven B. Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 17.

own fears lie in the opposite direction: what he fears is simplification, certainty, and even satisfaction—where the last leads to a cessation of questioning and debate. Smith finds a sympathetic echo of this concern in Tocqueville's fear of homogenization, Strauss's anxiety about a "stationary state" and defense of skepticism, and Berlin's embrace of pluralism and the "protean self."

In this Smith recalls another defender of modern liberty who was preoccupied with both modernity's uniqueness and liberty's defense: Benjamin Constant, who ended his famous defense of the nexus of individualism, commerce, and modern liberty with a call to appreciate and preserve the "noble disquiet" of human longing.[2] Smith, like Constant, Tocqueville, Berlin, and Strauss, fears the narrowing of horizons, the intellectual impoverishment, and the "vulgarity" (a term which revealingly recurs through the book) that the lessening of this longing would bring about. But he also does not want this longing to become so powerful that it destroys the achievements of modernity—liberalism and individualism. Hence his emphasis on modernity as self-conscious tension, his refusal of final reconciliation: maintaining the tension within modernity, refusing the resolution of disharmonies and the stilling of doubts, is necessary to the preservation of the complexity that Smith so appreciates. An achievement of his book is to leave us wondering, with him, whether both appreciation for modernity's achievements and our sense of disquiet with them can be sustained.

Modernity: Progress or Return? Old or Ever-Young?

Joshua L. Cherniss

Georgetown University

In my introduction to this symposium, I indicated that "epochal age" constitutes a suggestive theme in Smith's book, one which is connected to a more explicit concern with historical optimism and pessimism. In considering these themes further, I begin with modernity's "youth," with Machiavelli. Machiavelli

[2]Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns," in*Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 327.