



## **A Turning Point in Human History: Going Beyond Modernity to Identity Politics**

**Stephen B. Young**  
**Global Executive Director**  
**Caux Round Table for Moral Capitalism**

There is great angst among a certain cosmopolitan elite in what we have come to call “The West” over the rise of a cultural force which they do not understand and fear.

Modernity, an unprecedented stage in human history, is now some 200 years old, having begun with the Industrial Revolution in England and Scotland and, culturally, with the French Revolution, which brought enthusiasm to the work of rooting up and throwing out the *ancien regime* of king, aristocrat and priest. Perhaps modernity has run its course and a new template for civilization is emerging. Thus, our cosmopolitan elite has become the *ancien regime* of our time.

Progressive elites, seeking to take modernity to its logical extreme, refer to the global phenomenon now opposing them as “Populist Nationalism.” They see it most in support for Donald Trump in the United States, in stubborn antipathy to the European Union in the U.K., in the dogmatic parochialisms leading the way in Hungary and Poland and in the strange political marriage of the far right and the antic left in Italy. In India, the Hindu purist Narendra Modi, another populist nationalist (“India for the Hindus”), is projected to win re-election as Prime Minister.

Just last Saturday in Australia, the sentiment of “populist nationalism” gave a surprise electoral victory to the liberal coalition, the conservative party, against the more progressive labor party. I happened to be in Sydney for a round table hosted by Westpac Bank just before the election and picked up a general opinion that labor would win because the liberals have been in leadership disarray for several years now. But elite conventional wisdom was, once again, wrong.

With our entering a new era of conflict between a cosmopolitan and individualistic elite and more communal loyalties of the middle classes, what is the future for the Caux Round Table for Moral Capitalism’s (CRT) principles for business, government, civil society organizations and owners of wealth?

I suggest that the CRT principles offer a way out of the conflict. They reject parochialism and its identity politics but at the same time validate systems of checks and balances so that differences of opinion and practice can sustain themselves within a pluralistic social order. The CRT sets of ethical principals do not force a choice between either modernism or populist nationalism. Rather, they provide guidelines for dialogue and mutual concern, preventing militant extremes from dictating to others what they can and cannot think or do.

Modernist progressives now fear the preference of populist nationalists for hard men such as Trump, Putin, Orban, Netanyahu, Modi, Duterte and Xi Jinping as leaders, as was the case in the 1930s. They deplore populist nationalism for its intolerances and authoritarianisms and would prevent expression of its pre-modernist beliefs. They can't fathom its rejection of Enlightenment rationality for 1) privileging the narcissistic liberty of individuals, 2) deconstructing religion and traditional beliefs and 3) taking nihilistic joy in not having any secure truth.

But rather than trust society to open competition of ideas, modernist progressives prefer to subordinate cultural forces to their preferences for rational utilitarianism and full autonomy for individuals through management of society by state manipulation of authoritarian law which gives people rights without responsibilities.

In contrast, the CRT principles recognize rights but also value responsibilities to others, to the community and to the environment.

Such modernist progressives are a new class as foreseen by the 19<sup>th</sup> century anarchist Bakunin, an aristocracy of educated privilege promoted and maintained by the state. In 1927, Julian Benda described this class as a "trahison de clerics." A few years later, Jose Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses* took another critical approach to the rise of a ruling class of the sophisticated and the prejudices of those who opposed them. Trotsky and later Dijas pointed to the ruling power of the new class as a necessary consequence of Stalinist social engineering. In the United States, the former Trotskyite James Burnham wrote *The Managerial Revolution* in 1941 predicting that capitalism too would be taken over by managers. In the 1980s in Minnesota, my good friend, the lawyer David Lebedoff, wrote *The New Elite: the Death of Democracy*.

The new elite's self-serving and socially constructed aristocratic identity privileges them to be the progressive cultural, social and political class bringing modernization and progress to humanity. Those who deplorably resist their leadership are called out as reactionaries, as those who would return to more pre-modern conditions with more tribal mores and loyalties.

And there is some truth to this. Populist nationalism is parochial; it rejects universal claims of right and justice which seek, without compromise, to override every competing identity and more mystical grounds for giving meaning to our lives. Populist nationalism is not fully modern and scientific. It makes room for emotions and pre-judgments about self and others. It finds comfort in collective passions and conformities.

But populist nationalism is not limited to the Trump or Brexit protests against elites. It is the essence of the cultural politics of Netanyahu in Israel. He radiates the conviction of a people confirmed by the Torah, the tribal particularism taught an ancient God. Similarly, Islamic fundamentalism and Jihadist terror is particularistic and tribal. The demands of Scots and Catalans for independent nationhood are not universalistic. The use by Putin of a myth that the

Rus people are to be the Third Rome and the similar use by Xi Jinping of an ancient myth that only the Han people have a mandate from Heaven to give order to the entire world are pre-modern tribal conceits.

In a deep sense, populist nationalism does not affirm that we are all completely free souls. Rather, it presumes that our personal choices should, to some extent, advantage the common good of our ethnic collective.

One of the first students of modernization, Max Weber, proposed that human systems were destined to evolve from traditional cultish, patrimonial ties of kinship obligations and feudal reciprocities and from dependence on charismatic leaders to rational/legal justifications for the secular state and its regulatory bureaucracies. Modernization theory after World War II followed Weber in so understanding the human odyssey through time. Rational principles separated the modern from the narrow-minded, obscurantist, prejudices of past cultures and leaderships.

The new, late 19th century discipline of sociology, growing up as part of modernization, posited a polarized distinction between an older *gemeinschaft* form of society of narrowly circumscribed community with emotionally significant personal relationships and an emerging rational/legal *gesellschaft* form of society wherein individuals defined themselves by efficient and instrumental role-responsibilities. The distinction was used to define the process of modernization where the older *gemeinschaft* cultures would fade away to be replaced by industrialized *gesellschaft* hierarchies of power.

But Weber noted that the rationalization of our worldviews, our cultures, our roles in life and our institutions would produce “disenchantment” with the world. In other words, Weber predicted that modernity would not bring spiritual happiness and ease of mind but rather some form of perpetual psycho-social alienation.

It might very well be that the early 21<sup>st</sup> century trend of populist nationalism seeks to address that “disenchantment” with the world which Weber predicted.

The noted American sociologist Talcott Parsons, a student of Weber, proposed antinomies between the two opposing standards of social action, with one standard being the attributes of *gemeinschaft* and the other standard explaining the social dynamics of *gesellschaft*. As had Weber, Parsons assumed that the modern pattern of social action would replace the older practices. The assumption that humanity was destined to move from tradition to rational and enlightened advanced social and economic orders gave rise to modernization theory and intentional efforts at cultural, social, economic and political development under the global embrace of capitalism and constitutional democracy. The proclamation of this program of modernization was the 1948 Declaration of Universal Human Rights.

### **Pattern Variables**

Parsons proposed that the behavior and personality patterns constituting the special orientations of advanced societies towards which all humanity was inexorably moving were: 1) affective neutrality (emotional control); 2) self-orientation; 3) universalism; 4) achievement; and 5) specificity.

He proposed that the opposing behavior and personality patterns of traditional societies, those yet to modernize, were: 1) affectivity (emotionalism); 2) collective orientation; 3) particularism; 4) ascription; and 5) diffuseness.

Thus, in our contemporary political polarization of populist nationalism challenging the universal norms of globalization, Populist Nationalism embodies affectivity, collective orientation, particularism and diffuseness. Internationalist globalism, on the other hand, adopts behavior patterns of affective neutrality, self-orientation, universalism, achievement and specificity.

What our times are revealing is that the presumption of modernity necessarily replacing tradition is false. Populist nationalist movements demonstrate that older patterns are still meaningful to many people. Those pattern variables dominant in traditional societies have not disappeared but rather still provide something of psycho-social importance to individuals.

Let us therefore look more closely at the pattern variables and what they offer to individuals in order to understand the continuing appeal of the older preferences.

The pattern variables enter into our lives as 1) shaping our choices of action; 2) habits of choice installed in our personalities; 3) defining social roles; and 4) setting values for culture. They create consistency of choosing.

Affectivity is a normative pattern which grants an actor permission to take advantage of an opportunity for immediate gratification without regard for evaluative considerations and to express personal emotions. Affective neutrality, on the other hand, is a normative pattern which calls upon individuals to renounce certain gratifications and to restrain impulses and subordinate them to considerations of discipline and role-responsibility.

Collectivity-orientation imposes upon an actor a need to give primacy to interests, goals and values shared with other members of a given collective, thus defining the person's responsibility to the collectivity. The ego in question will prefer to live by superego norms. Self-orientation gives an actor permission to pursue private interests without giving regard to how his/her action reflects or bears upon the preferred patterns of the collectivity.

Particularism occurs when an actor takes an orientation towards objects or situations which reflect very personal relations arising from personal status and social bonds. The actor's situation - not general attributes of objects and events - determines how such objects and events are to be perceived and how the actor will respond to them. Universalism expects the actor to treat the situation in accordance with transcendent, general norms of universal application.

Ascription is a need-disposition of the actor which accepts objects and situations as defined by their culturally specified attributes such as in the statement, "He was to the manor born." Achievement, on the other hand, is a need-disposition which motivates the actor to assess objects and situations by performance. For persons, ascription places them in the status to which they were born while achievement values them for what they accomplish regardless of assigned status.

Diffuseness is the normative pattern in which an actor responds flexibly to the many dynamics of a situation. Specificity is the contrary normative pattern whereby the actor responds narrowly with specific criteria in mind to be imposed on the situational moment, excluding consideration of all other possibilities.

## **Dialectic or Dominion?**

What if Weber and Parsons were right as to the systemic differences between two modes of social action but wrong on one necessarily evolving into the other? Wrong that a homogenous conformity to the pattern variables of affective neutrality, self-orientation, universalism, specificity and achievement among all peoples would be the end of human history in a perpetual status quo?

Professor Francis Fukuyama in his recent book on identity has given us a very sound reason to question the certainty of Weber and Parsons on modernity with its disenchantment being able to take over our personalities and social orders from traditionalism. Fukuyama reminds us of what Plato called “Thymos” as a perpetual human need-disposition. “Thymos” denominates that part of our natures which seeks recognition from others. Part of our inherent moral sense which ties us to others requires reciprocity – we engage with others most fully when they have regard for us. Moral sense is a two-way dynamic of joint intentionality. If we do not feel that we are acceptable to others, we turn away from them or we seek to impose our sense of self-worth on them.

The pattern variables of modernity do not facilitate our being seen as special; they do not satisfy our need to receive “Thymos.” Thus, the patterns of modernity leave us disenchanted with our world. In order to place ourselves more comfortably in the world, we search for the pattern variables of tradition which might more easily provide us with place and acceptance.

Particularism, not universalism, elevates us as being unique; affectivity in others, not affective neutrality, permits them to emotionally respond to us; having a place in a collective instead of being a lone ego in perpetual competition for place and status provides us with reassurance and belonging; diffuseness, not specificity, places others in a position to act towards us with engagement, not estrangement; and ascription gives us a status when we cannot achieve social distinction on our own. The traditional pattern variables which align with populist nationalism might, after all, be good for our souls, reassuring us with a sense of place, relational support and having value just because we are who we are.

But at the same time, they might keep us down, confined and circumscribed in a status quo where the pattern variables of modernity would provide opportunity for better self-expression.

What if the relationship between the contrasting pattern variables were a dialectic with neither vanquishing the other? Individuals in such conditions would have a choice between the variables, using one at times and its alternatives at other times. Universalism, as it grew with the modernization of economics and political systems, would have to tolerate some residuum of particularism and particularism would need to accept limitations imposed by universalistic ideals.

Similarly, persons and cultures would respond along continuums of affectivity and affectively neutral, self-orientation and collectivity-orientation, ascription and achievement and diffuseness and specificity – as personal and social interests and inclinations would determine from time to time. A person, thus, could be very universalistic in one situation and then particularistic in a different choice of action.

The model would not be totalitarian but pluralistic; not uniform but multiple; not static but in constant flux. Such balance and flexibility were advocated by Aristotle with his idea of the Mean; by the Buddha in his proposal for a middle way; and by the Chinese text *The Doctrine of the Mean*.

Respect for human dignity would permit the particularism and the emotional affectivity of individuals to be socially acceptable. Such respect would make room for ascription of personal identity, as well as for personal achievement. Providing tolerance for other individuals would permit acceptance of their ascriptive status and characteristics as needed for their collectivity-orientation, in addition to regard for their freely chosen instrumental roles and performance of the duties attached thereto which promote their self-orientation.

A preference for subsidiarity – distributed power and authority – would open decision-making to the pattern variables of *gemeinschaft* – affectivity, particularism, diffuseness, ascription and collectivity-orientation – in contradiction to the centralizing and bureaucratizing demands of *gessellschaft*.

Open societies, as described by Karl Popper, and institutions of open learning, as guided by the liberal arts, have no need to choose only *gessellschaft* and its more impersonal pattern variables over the pattern variables which generate *gemeinschaft* cultures and societies.

The CRT ethical principles can be invoked in any choice of pattern variables, as they focus on dynamics of balance and fairness where decisions are made. They would open the particular to the universal and restrain the universal from repressing the particular; protect the affective from formalism and free the affectively neutral from unthinking subordination to short-sighted emotions; provide space for self-orientation and protect collective meanings; value the diffuse while insisting on gaining advantage from specificity of role responsibilities; and give honor to ascriptive status while calling forth the gains to be had from achievement behaviors.

The CRT ethical principles provide transcendence over value polarization in our age of increasing intolerance of others.