

J'accuse! The Case for Pre-modernism, or, the Rural-urban Divide

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, JAN 25 2019

Emile Zola's now world-famous letter to the President of the French Republic, dated 13 January 1898, "*J'Accuse!*" (complete text of the letter in English translation here), set the stage for correcting a grave miscarriage of justice carried out by the French military and the secular French state against an innocent Jewish military officer, Alfred Dreyfus. The degree of corruption that Zola identified in his letter occurred not in pre-Revolutionary France as a mobilizing force for the (secular) revolution. Rather, it occurred in late-19th century France, a hundred years after the Revolution, at the height of modernism, secularism, and centralized state authority.

Without the Dreyfus Affair, which Zola brought to light with his letter, Theodore Herzl might not have had his political conversion experience in which he lost faith in the promises of the European secular Enlightenment and decided that Jews must have a national home of their own to defend their interests everywhere. The Dreyfus Affair was some combination of beginning-point and turning-point for Herzl, as with many Jewish Europeans at the time.

Political corruption, then, for small favors or nodes of power that seem consequential at the time may end with results in world historical shifts that the small (and large) instigators would never anticipate, nor likely desire. It is unlikely that the anti-Semites who wrongfully imprisoned Alfred Dreyfus on charges of treason would have favored the establishment of a Jewish state. At the risk of being too cheeky, although not, I think, heretical, the Dreyfus-Zola-Herzl-Israel chain of (at least in retrospect) path-dependent events is some of the best evidence I have ever heard for the existence of God – and that S/He has an awesome sense of humor.

Enter several of my great intellectual heroes, including James Scott, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Clifford Geertz, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Timothy Mitchell, E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Mircea Eliade. Putting them together suggests a story for the late-modern era (approx. mid-1700s to present) that looks something like the following:

Modernist bureaucrats and technocrats, acting upon their [almost certainly woefully flawed] understandings of contemporary science decide to raze the center of cities like Paris, or to flatten villages altogether. They replace said cities, towns, and neighborhoods with quarters built upon grids that will require no **local knowledge** to navigate. Local practices – social, political, economic, and otherwise – are violently, non-violently, and through intimidation crushed and banned in efforts to "**homogenize**" the populations into something that bureaucrats and technocrats can understand as one **people or nation**. The state takes over **lands that had supported many peoples**, who are thus evicted and made homeless. It takes over agriculture, or, it works in tandem with a few capital holders to institute mono-cropping on said lands, which results in forest death in old growth forests in parts of Europe.

According to Emile Durkheim, God, Grandfather and Grandmother are replaced with the [centralized] State in effort to maintain social solidarity based upon a social unit too small to have any chance of success at ever achieving social solidarity (e.g., the nuclear family). The state is suddenly fascinated with collecting all manner of intimate minutiae about its citizens and its landscape, including family practices and home addresses for whatever eventualities might arise in terms of the state's need to know (Enter, the state as **voyeur**.)

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The “thick description” and “local knowledge” necessary to navigate (what Scott calls to “make legible”) pre-modern towns, villages, cities, agricultural works, and social relations (e.g., privacy) is replaced with the great impersonal (centralized and benevolent) State. In reality, ethnographic variation, social solidarity, and the local knowledge needed to navigate it all are replaced with anomie for many and suicide for some (in increasing numbers at the time). For others, new enforced land laws eventually result in mass migration to urban centers, and the demotion of agricultural peasants – who freely directed their own personal schedules and largely engaged in self-rule at the local level – to urban factory workers (e.g., prior to approximately the early 20th century, paid slave labor), often with no political franchise.

The replacement of God with secular authority is a significant part of the picture, as seen in important fictional works from the period, such as *The Brothers Karamazov*. The grounding, stabilizing, and (emphasis on self-) self-disciplining effect of experiencing the Divine for most people is crushed (at least in public expression) and discredited as a sort of heresy against modernism in what has long-since come to be known as modernization theory.

Closer to home, (sub-)urban cultural norms – which many officials and academics alike appear to approach as necessarily hegemonic, or which, at the least, go unquestioned as *naturally hegemonic* – are contrasted with that great enemy, Country Music, in as much as it appears to (and does) represent a sort of cultural and political opposition to the cultural hegemony of the Center. In the U.S., by my observation, said self-appointed (cultural) hegemonic Center is dispersed geographically but is represented primarily by people whose families came from the Eastern Seaboard at least as recently as the 1950s and 1960s.

(Sub-)urban politics vis à vis rural peoples today smack of the worst of 19th century technocratic efforts to quash difference. Difference and diversity exist within ethnic groups, not only across them. I suggest the rural/urban as our great and typically unquestioned divide in significant parts of the West today. With it come our own religious-secular tensions, or what I am calling *pre-modernism* (e.g., an evoking of tradition in religion and social practices) in contrast to and in conflict with both *modernization* and *post-modernization*. The latter two, when it comes to these questions, are very much the same in orientation: secular, top-down, authoritarian, and disappointingly non-self-reflective.

About the author:

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