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The Making of the Modern World

We can now return to some of the more general issues raised by this study of two theories concerning the making of the modern world. These are general reflections, stimulated by the thoughts of Maitland and Fukuzawa, but also drawing on other work I have undertaken over the last ten years. In particular, the chapter also draws on ideas generated by the two other books which I have written exploring these broad themes of the origins and nature of the modern world.¹

By the time of Fukuzawa’s death in 1901 and that of Maitland in 1906, the mystery of how the modern world has been made had been clearly identified and a set of hypotheses to explain it had been put forward. Yet much of the subsequent work during the more than 90 years since then has buried both the question and any possible answers, so that the earlier work has become increasingly obscured. This book, and its companion on Montesquieu and his successors, has largely been an excavation to unearth something which was once widely known but is now largely forgotten.² Before we examine this mystery once more, it is worth speculating briefly on why the very existence of an enormous puzzle has virtually disappeared.

One part of the answer stems from Tocqueville’s profound remark that ‘great successful revolutions, by effecting the disappearance of the causes which brought them about, by their very success, become themselves incomprehensible.’³ The transformation of the world during the last few centuries is certainly a ‘great successful revolution’, and it has largely erased, at least among many western intellectuals, the memories of how difficult that transformation has been and hence any incentive to try to understand it.

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Thus the fact that the Enlightenment solution, centring on liberty, wealth and equality, has spread so far and wide and become a part of the air which the world breathes is one of the reasons why it is now so difficult even to see that there was once a mystery at all. A ‘modern’ citizen of a ‘modern’ nation, however gifted, finds it hard even to see that there was any doubt about the current triumph of ‘modernity’. It is worth briefly summarizing a few of the major changes in order to see how the actual course of events has concealed the mystery.

Part of the argument of all of the great Enlightenment thinkers was that England was a bridge from the *ancien rûme* to the modern world. England for a very long time was a receiver of ideas from outside. The artifacts and philosophies from the ancient civilizations and of all the other contemporary world civilizations poured into her over the centuries, were modified and then disseminated again. This transference is equally true of other countries. What makes England special is a set of accidents. At a crucial point, when western Europe was on the ascendant, England took the lead. It was able to do so because through the process of the absorption of ideas, it largely developed a new socio-technical form, the industrial system. At the same time it had accumulated the largest empire the world has ever known, including the vast population of India, and it replicated itself within this empire as well as on the continent of North America which would one day be the dominant power on earth.

This means that the curious set of institutions, funneled through one small island, spread widely over the world. With the demise of communism and with the creeping capitalism of China, there are now only limited alternatives to the system which evolved over the centuries in England. If we probe below the surface we shall find that now, while England itself has shrunk to a second-rate power, the ‘virtual’ England spreads very widely. It has lost its Empire, but to a large extent the inner principles which made it so odd in the middle of the eighteenth century are now taken for granted either as a reality or an aspiration through much of the world.

The political trap has been broken, temporarily at least. The absolute sway of a single ruler or small group has been challenged and for all its weaknesses, democracy, the rule of the people by the people, is proclaimed as the only acceptable form of government. As Fukuyama shows, the victory of this form is only very recent. As late as the 1960s the majority of the countries in the