

## Strange Modernity?

**Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern**, by James Vernon, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, xvii +166 pp., £16.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-520-28204-9

When did Britain become modern? In this bracing new book, James Vernon makes the case for the half century between 1830 and 1880 as being absolutely crucial. His starting point is that the eclipse of the paradigm of ‘modernisation’ has left a confusing plurality of ‘modernities’ in its wake, and that it is necessary to introduce more clarity into ‘the nature of the modern condition’. His three main claims are that the growth and mobility of the population around the turn of the nineteenth century created a ‘society of strangers’, that this new society posed challenges for traditional practices of political, social and economic life which were eventually reordered around abstract and bureaucratic procedures, and that this new experience of abstraction and estrangement led in turn to new ways to embed local and personal relations across those fields. Such an austere summary does not do justice to book’s scope: it traverses arguments about social, economic and political transformation over the last three centuries, and will be an invaluable introduction to any student interested in the way cultural studies has reshaped recent historiography. Nevertheless, the concept of the ‘society of strangers’ is called upon to do some heavy lifting if it is to sustain the idea that modernity is a ‘singular condition’. Can it bear the load?

The idea that population growth and increased mobility from the late eighteenth century created a *society* of strangers initially seems plausible enough, and Vernon has a good nose for striking evidence – the popularity of guide books explaining to clueless travellers how best to engage (or avoid) strangers on coaches and trains, and how to navigate the bustling streets and thoroughfares of expanding cities. There was, of course, also an enormous literature either celebrating or traducing the conditions of new cities. But we ought to be careful about taking such material as evidence of the creation of a qualitatively different society – it may, perhaps, tell us that the experience of busy streets was being transformed by the knowledge of recent revolutionary upheaval.

A sceptical eye might be turned on the ‘society of strangers’ from two directions. First, what came before? While Vernon accepts that the figure of the stranger – often, as in Simmel’s classic essay, in the guise of a trader – was present before around 1750, there is a danger of resuscitating notions of traditional society, with their somewhat idealised small-scale, face-to-face communities. To be sure, this might have been the experience of many

who lived in small villages, but anywhere a reasonably sized population cluster emerged, and with it the specialisation of roles, we might expect the experience of strangers to increase. This is not restricted to the modern era, as cities as diverse as Uruk, Rome and Tenochtitlan testify. Second, is the modern experience necessarily one of a *society* of strangers? After all, communities with a strong sense of identity and neighbourhood can be found not just in rural villages but also in the heart of inner cities, as touchingly depicted in the early films of Terence Davies. The key factor is likely to be persistent mobility: not just moving to a new town, but moving from one abode to the next and frequent changes of employment. In any situation where housing or employment is relatively stable over a generation, then the experience of inhabiting a society of strangers is likely to be diminished.

There are also some intriguing questions about periodization. While he insists that the middle of the nineteenth century was the crucial moment of modernity, it is striking that Vernon's discussion often stretches back to the seventeenth century. This is emblematic of deeper unresolved tensions in the historiography. In the seventeenth century the 'modern' was contrasted with the 'ancient', and only in the following century was the 'medieval' popularised as a period. So, until the early twentieth century the 'modern' meant post-medieval Europe, and it was only with the relatively recent carving out of 'early modern' that 'modern' has increasingly been used to refer to the period from the late eighteenth century. When classical sociology considered the transition from 'traditional' to 'modern' society – whether as a shift from feudalism to capitalism or as *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* – and with it the emergence of those markers of modernity – rationality, self-interest, individualism, universalism, and so on – they were generally considering the problem of the nature of post-medieval Europe. As E.A. Wrigley has argued, part of the story of 'modernisation' concerns the process of *commercialisation* from the sixteenth century, a process associated as much, if not more, with Holland as with England.<sup>1</sup> But 'modernisation' writing of the twentieth century collapsed this together with the process of *industrialization*, and tended to assume that the one led inexorably to the other. Separating the economic basis for each (the one based on an advanced organic economy with strict limits to growth, and the other capable of potentially limitless growth because of a mineral economy based on coal) provides us with distinct ways of approaching 'modernity' – it challenges us to think again about how we understand the *early-modern* period, and not to assume any special status for England, and it also challenges us to think, in the case of Britain, about what was uniquely caused by its industrial growth, and what was part of a longer-term set of processes.

Strangely, Vernon does not consider the economy until his final chapter, and even then the discussion is primarily about the cultural constitution of economic practices and knowledge rather than actual production, exchange, and consumption. He does argue that for the early modern period markets were not so much abstract concepts but real places where real exchange occurred between real people, but this risks underplaying how extensive commercialisation was even by the middle of the seventeenth century. We might think that in the expansion of networks of exchange – and credit and debt – a society of strangers really was created: economic agents increasingly linked, and in some cases increasingly dependent, on people whom they had never met. This led to the emergence of new means of facilitating commerce and coping with risk. Vernon stresses the importance for seventeenth-century financial markets on access to published information about commodity price currents and exchange rate currents – such financial information was to proliferate continuously over the following centuries. Another theme is the growth of ‘abstracted’ economic information: letters, accounting, guides, filing, ticker-tape, and so on. The state had a role to play as well in stabilising the monetary system and standardising weights and measures. These all aided the reduction of the costs and risks of exchange. Vernon also stresses the emergence of economic science, pointing to the narrowing of the subject with the marginal revolution, the growing application of mathematics to economic modelling and the emergence of sophisticated statistics. These are obviously crucial stories, but the urgency to create scientific knowledge of economic behaviour goes back to the seventeenth century. Indeed the growing awareness of the complexity of credit networks spawned some of the earliest theorisations about the nature of markets and of trust, and would lead, by the time of Hume and Smith, to a sophisticated ‘science’ of society grounded in ideas of commercial sociability.

*Distant Strangers* is also concerned with the reshaping of state and civil society. In the former case, Vernon sees the extension of the reach of government and the fashioning of new forms of legitimacy and new techniques of rule. In a series of discussions of the census, mapping, taxation, civil service reform, and the growth of expertise, he sees the development of a bureaucratic and abstract form of state. Much of this is bracing, but two puzzles emerge concerning periodization and characterization. The growth of the state is a staple of early modern historiography, and work – including Foucault’s – has stressed the way that from the seventeenth century commerce became a reason of state, and populations increasingly the objects of regulation and discipline. The imperatives of competition and war required men and money, which brought new technologies of rule into being. Although the British state retained manifestations of older, personal, localised rule, it was also rather efficient at

grafting on new forms of bureaucracy and management where necessary, for instance the excise and the dockyards, and responding to the pressures of war, as with income tax. Surprisingly, Vernon does not employ Foucault's idea of liberal governmentality to show the way that the state ceded a good deal of the technique of rule to its 'liberal' subjects. Indeed, his characterisation of the nineteenth century is at odds with a lot of recent writing. There is a touch of hyperbole: the 'inquisitive' state had a 'voracious' appetite for knowledge of its populace, and it developed a 'faceless' – the word recurs frequently – bureaucracy to achieve it. But, notwithstanding contemporary fears of Bonapartist centralisation and Prussian bureaucratization, the reality was rather different. We see instead a comparatively small, amateur state, often reluctant to extend its intrusive powers, and often ineffective when it did so. To be sure, those who experienced its coercive powers may not have felt this way, but to suggest that the 'violent force' of the state was 'very much apparent' seems excessive – as the halting roll-out of the police force would suggest. It should be added that accepting this view need not commit us to the liberal myth that the state really was an impartial night-watchman.

Turning to civil society, Vernon rejects 'self-congratulatory' narratives of democratisation in favour of exploring the 'new forms of abstraction' created by the 'society of strangers'. Accepting the vibrancy of associational life in the eighteenth century, he argues that it remained largely restricted to local affairs, and only occasionally galvanised by charismatic leaders. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, friendly societies, trades unions, and pressure groups had become bureaucratically organised national structures. Rather than seeing this as a response to the society of strangers, we might instead see it as a consequence of the growth of attachment made possible by the commercialisation and nationalisation of politics. Vernon – following Anderson<sup>2</sup> – rightly stresses the centrality of print culture: as it circulated around the transport infrastructure and commercial networks it helped entrench 'nation' and 'people' as ideas, and enabled a sense of sympathy to extend imaginatively beyond one's immediate associates. The pooling of activism and sharing of risk evident in popular politics was possible not because people saw themselves as strangers, but as citizens, even friends. In any case, this must not be exaggerated – many of these national organisations retained strong local identities: personal contact (through platform oratory, lecture tours, and local leadership) was important, as was having a decent local newspaper. The same point might be made about electoral culture. Vernon sees the formation of 'an individuated and anonymous political subject' and a culture of 'uniformity and regularity'. But could it not instead be suggested that since Britain resisted the abstractions of natural rights, there remained a good deal of irregularity and personality? The franchise

varied between county and borough, and between Britain and Ireland; the appeal to representation of communities rather than individuals was slow to die; and persistence of territorially-defined constituencies attested to the importance of the putative link between representative and elector. Even into the late nineteenth century, despite the attempts of national party organizations, local political identities and powers remained strong. The 'rationalisation' of the electoral system has been a decidedly halting affair.

A final central theme is what Vernon calls the 're-embedding' of new forms of the local and the personal in social, political, and economic life. This, he suggests, is a dialectical response to the encroachment of abstraction rather than simply a survival of traditional customs. But if we were to tell a more evolutionary story which did not overstate the pervasiveness of rationalisation and bureaucratisation, we could also account for the adaptation – and even persistence – of older beliefs, practices, and institutions. After all, however sophisticated economic instruments and knowledge became, the reality of the market – as Paul Johnson has shown<sup>3</sup> – was that it was deeply affected by institutional and social biases. Vernon's own evidence shows the enduring reliance on reputation and character among City of London traders throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the fears that joint-stock companies would inaugurate impersonal and anonymous capitalism. Indeed, some of the processes Vernon discusses reveal a striking earlier ancestry. As the size of businesses grew at the end of the nineteenth century, it became impossible for factory bosses to know their workers personally, so they found new ways of retaining loyalty – maybe a cult of personality, perhaps sponsoring a football team, or by patronizing libraries, parks and schools. But this could be seen as simply a repeat of the process a century and a half earlier whereby the growing wealth of the landed elite enabled them to retreat from the communities of which they were a part onto their newly built estates, and to find other ways to cultivate the affection of their tenants and villagers

The thrill of *Distant Strangers* is that it is not afraid to return to large questions. Vernon is rightly troubled that historians are saying 'more and more about less and less', and believes a return to 'macroexplanations of historical change' and 'big historical questions' would be beneficial. The issue of explanation certainly needs to be confronted head on, as cultural studies has generally disdained explanation in favour of interpretation and description. Vernon appears ambivalent on this – on a couple of occasions he insists he is not providing a causal history, and wants to explain only how, and not why, Britain became modern. On the 'big question' of modernity, it is not clear why it needs to be understood as a 'singular condition', or even, ultimately, whether it is a useful analytical category. A more

fruitful approach might be to recognise that while theories of modernisation have been discredited for proposing a linear and teleological sequence of historical stages, there was nevertheless *something* in their insistence that amidst the contingencies of history there were also patterns and processes at work that might be called ‘development’. If he doesn’t quite succeed – and perhaps wouldn’t want to – in bringing this theme to the fore, Vernon helps others do so. In particular, he makes a case for the centrality of the nineteenth century, a period out of favour among historians for some time. But rather than seeing the middle decades as inaugurating ‘modernity’, it might be desirable – and this is often his practice – to contextualise the nineteenth century in the broader sweep of the last four centuries, and thereby use the supposed division between ‘early’ and ‘late’ modern history not as a boundary marker but as an explanatory invitation. That way, we may be better placed to understand the role occupied by the nineteenth century – and by Britain – in the global evolutionary pathways into the present.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E. A. Wrigley, ‘The process of modernization and the industrial revolution in England’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3 (1972), 225-59; idem, *Continuity, Chance and Change: the character of the industrial revolution in England*, Cambridge, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> P. Johnson, *Making the Market: the Victorian origins of corporate capitalism*, Cambridge, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: a global history of the nineteenth century*, Princeton, 2014.