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Modernism, modernity and contemporality: conceptualizing the modern in Scotland's modern studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of Modern Studies, a school subject unique to Scotland. First taught in the 1960s, Modern Studies was originally conceived as an option for students discontinuing their studies in history and geography. Since then, though, Modern Studies has carved a distinctive curricular niche and has become one of the most popular subjects in Scottish schools.

Despite this popularity—or, perhaps, because of it—Modern Studies has not received the same critical analysis as other subjects in the school curriculum. The subject remains one defined by its content (political literacy, social issues, and international relations), rather than by its disciplinary or epistemic underpinnings.

This paper uses Toulmin's (1990) conception of modernity to analyse course documents and examination papers. This analysis suggests that Modern Studies was imbued from the start with three foundational assumptions. First, a positivist ontology that believes certainty about the social world is possible. Second, a belief that Weberian means-end rationality is the most appropriate approach to evaluating and making sense of social relations. Third, a telos which positions liberal capitalism as the inevitable end-state of human affairs. Modern Studies is, therefore, not just 'modern' but *modernist*.

The paper explores and develops these critiques with reference to specific examination questions and concludes by proposing a programme for renewing and reinvigorating the subject in an age of epistemic uncertainty and global environmental crises.

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In May 1962, the first cohort of Scottish students sat their 'Ordinary Grade' examination in an experimental new subject called 'Modern Studies'. Originally conceived as a practical grounding in history and geography for students who completed just the minimum compulsory schooling, the subject has become a hugely popular and respected curriculum mainstay (SQA, 2023). The subject's success has much to do with the 'Modern' of its title: the subject promises to be relevant, adaptable and up-to-date—all qualities with perennial appeal to adolescent learners. This paper seeks to problematize this simplistic conception of 'Modern' as a synonym for 'recent'. Instead, it argues that the subject is not just modern, it is *modernist*; an exercise in reifying and encouraging a particular set of ontological assumptions about the social world.

This paper proposes that Modern Studies in Scotland is epistemically undertheorized and that a re-evaluation of its foundational assumptions is long overdue. Using Toulmin's (1990) conception of modernity to analyse examination papers, I argue that *Modern Studies* was imbued from the start with three foundational assumptions. First, a positivist ontology that

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believes certainty about the social world is possible. Second, a belief that means-end rationality is the most appropriate approach to evaluating and making sense of social relations. Third, a telos which positions liberal capitalism as the inevitable end-state of human affairs.

The paper begins with a short context on the history and development of Modern Studies in Scotland. It then draws on the work of Toulmin to unpack some of the modernist assumptions which underpin the subject. In the more substantive section, the paper uses insights from Bhaskar, Weber, and Mark Fisher to analyse examination questions and uncover the ways in which the subject sustains narratives of modernism and modernity. The final section of the paper considers ways forward for the subject in the context of global environmental crises and discursive plurality.

Modern studies: a uniquely Scottish subject

The origins of Modern Studies lie in reforms to Scottish education in the 1950s which aimed to provide certificated recognition to students leaving high school aged 15 after the minimum four years of study (Lawrie, 1987; Salomon, 1977). Although there was broad political and public support for these changes, concerns were raised that these 'ordinary grade' students might undergo a narrow school experience which excluded history and geography, leading to a proposal for a new subject which would,

'include something of both history and geography, the emphasis being placed on what would be useful for a man or woman to know as a background to current affairs' (Curriculum Working Party, 1959, Paragraph 51 (ii). Cited in Salomon (1977)).

Although it began as a subject for those perceived as less academically able, Modern Studies is now respected mainstay of the Scottish curriculum (Maitles, 2008). This evolution can be understood in three phases using a typology developed by Goodson (1988), drawing on the work of Layton (1973). Initially, Goodson suggests, school subjects are 'callow intruders' into the curriculum, attracting students with their novelty and relevance before they developed academic respectability alongside 'a tradition of scholarly work and a corps of trained specialists' (p. 10). In the case of Modern Studies, this transition was astonishingly rapid. Just 350 'Ordinary Grade' scholars sat the first examination in 1962, but by 1968 the subject was deemed rigorous enough to be offered at Higher Grade (university entrance level) too. In the same year, the first qualified Modern Studies teachers left training college, sowing the seeds for Layton's scholarly community (Salomon, 1977). Further academic respectability was conferred in 1971 with the founding of the Modern Studies Association (MSA, 2023).¹ From this point on, the subject developed an identity of its own, moving further away from the 'parent disciplines' of geography and history. Goodson argues that this strong academic identity can be a double-edged sword. Although respectability confers a certain security and prestige on a subject, it can lead to complacency and lose the disruptive energy which inspired it in the first place. When this happens, Layton writes, 'students are initiated into a tradition, their attitudes approaching passivity and resignation, a prelude to disenchantment' (1973, cited in Goodson, 1988, p. 10).

If Scottish students are disenchanted with Modern Studies, it is not apparent in the subject's popularity. In 2022, Modern Studies was the 6th most popular option subject at National 5 level (typically studied by 14- and 15-year-olds). It comprises three areas of substantive content which are assessed in one timed-examination and an independent assignment (SQA, 2019b):

- democracy in Scotland and the UK;
- Social Issues in the UK;
- international issues;

The subject is even more popular at Higher Level (typically studied by 15- and 16-year-olds), where it is the 5th most popular subject. At Higher Level, students complete a second timed-examination paper which assesses, 'skills of analysing, evaluating and synthesising evidence' (SQA, 2019a, p. 5).

Unlike most other subjects, the Modern Studies syllabus does not prescribe specific items of content for study, these are instead determined by schools. For example, for Higher *Section 3-International Issues*, schools can choose to either study a ‘world power’ or a ‘world issue’. In both cases, the specific power or issue is not prescribed; instead, candidates (or, more likely, teachers) may choose a major world power from *any* members of the G20 group of countries ... excluding the UK’ or ‘*any* significant recent issue or conflict which extends beyond the boundaries of any single country’ (SQA, 2019a, p. 5).

These open parameters for subject content are key to the subject’s recency. Rather than prescribing specific case studies (which may quickly become out-of-date) the examination board requires schools and teachers to constantly review the content which is taught. Students must comment on *ongoing* international crises and the *most recent* parliamentary elections. The leading scholar of Modern Studies is clear that this recency is the subject’s unique selling point, writing in 2003 that:

This, of course, adds greatly to the workload but also keeps the subject relevant, dynamic and interesting and goes a long way to explain the popularity of the subject with S6 and FE students. (Maitles, Modern Studies, 2003, p. 572)

However, five years later, in the next edition of the same book, he appended the following to the same paragraph. In doing so, he hints at the ‘passivity, resignation and disenchantment’ about which Layton warned,

Nonetheless, there is a problem with content in the middle and upper school; for example, there is little space ... for the Iraq War, any aspect of the relationship of Israel with the Palestinians or its neighbours, or indeed any aspect of the Islamic World. This is something Modern Studies teachers need to confront. How can the syllabus be opened up to allow the study of areas of conflict that develop? Otherwise, in what sense is the subject ‘modern’? (Maitles, 2008)

Unpacking the modern in modern studies

Although the subject of Modern Studies is unique to Scotland, across the world subjects can be identified which cover some of the same ground: citizenship education and civics consider issues of political literacy, rights and responsibilities, while geography or ‘world studies’ might explore contemporary international issues. Perhaps the nearest analogue to Modern Studies is the ‘World Study Extended Essay’ which forms part of the International Baccalaureate (IB, 2023). Unlike Modern Studies, this course includes no mandatory content; instead, students are required to reflect on a global issue of their own choosing.

Although their content overlaps with Modern Studies, none of these subjects lays claim to the very concept of modernity in the way that the Scottish subject does. What are we to read into this? Salomon (1977) has suggested that the name was chosen simply because obvious alternatives—social studies, humanities, etc—were already in use in schools. Lawrie (1987, p. 333) argues for a more deliberate choice of name: ‘it was neutral, could mean virtually all things to all people, and—most of all—the word “modern” suggested relevance and usefulness’.

Although Lawrie’s explanation has some merit, the same could be said of many alternatives such as ‘current affairs’ or ‘world studies’. I argue instead that the word ‘modern’ is not just a synonym for ‘recent’ or ‘current’, but an ontological and epistemological claim by the subject (albeit perhaps an unconscious one).

Modern Studies was conceived in the late 1950s, an era in which European empires were in terminal decline, when most of humanity was either recently liberated from imperial rule or engaged in that struggle. It was a bipolar world in which former powers and newly liberated countries both looked to either the USSR or the USA for leadership and protection. In their own ways, the USSR and the USA represented teleological narratives of progress. Despite the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation, there was consensus that the world could be ‘made better’. For Fukuyama (1992) and others, the progress narrative became simpler still after the collapse of the USSR—liberal democracy

had proved its superiority in the marketplace of ideas and a bright future of prosperity and increasing personal freedom awaited.

This is not the world of today. While it is possible to argue endlessly about whether we live in 'late-modernity', 'liquid modernity' or 'post-modernity', most agree that something 'isn't quite right' with modernity. In countless ways, our old ways of reading the world no longer work in the face of ecological crises. As living standards decline, humans are migrating in unprecedented numbers. Meanwhile, nation states reassert their powers to control the movement of humans, while capital and information apparently flows freely between them. While these changes might be beyond the scale of human comprehension, it is obvious that modernity and modernism are no longer 'working' as we have come to expect—either as an ontological schema or as projects of human betterment.

Despite these epochal changes, the epistemological underpinnings of Modern Studies have remained largely unchanged since 1962. To be sure, the *content* of the subject remains impressively recent: students are asked about voting patterns in the most recent UK and Scottish elections, meanwhile 'world issues' include artificial intelligence, the COVID-19 pandemic, and China-Taiwanese relations. But even as the *content* shows awareness of the pace of change in late-(liquid-? Post-?) modernity, the working assumptions and tools given to students to read and interpret these remain resolutely modernist.

Methodology

To take our argument forward, we must have a clear idea of what is meant by 'modern'. Giddens (Giddens, 1990, p. 1) offers a historical definition, saying simply that it refers to, 'those modes of social life or organization emerging in Europe from around the seventeenth century [which] subsequently became worldwide in their influence. A more helpful (for our purposes) criterial definition is offered by Stephen Toulmin (1990) who identifies three 'pillars' on which modernity rests—'certainty', 'systemacity' and 'clean slate thinking' (p.179). Each of these pillars reflect a particular way in which we can read the modernness of modern studies.

- *Certainty* – Modern Studies as Modernism Studies—The subject inculcates students with a positivist mindset. Social problems are best understood empirically: 'research' and statistics are valorized.
- *Systemacity* – Modern Studies as Modernity Studies—The subject rests on the assumption that more systematic approaches to the social world are more efficient and therefore superior. While Weber critiqued this 'bureaucratic rationalism', it appears in Modern Studies in uncritical form. Conversely, affective, ideological or communitarian readings of the social world are denigrated and discredited or simply passed over.
- *Clean Slate Thinking* – Modern Studies as Contemporality Studies—The subject focuses on what is happening now, in contrast to history which looks at 'what went before'. The contemporariness of Modern Studies is key to its enduring appeal with adolescents, but it also positions it in a permanent present. In clean slate thinking, tradition has nothing to teach us—better answers can be found in certainty and systems.

The next section of the paper draws on each of Toulmin's pillars of modernity in turn and uses each to analyse and critique the subject. This critique draws on five documents produced in a single year – 2019 – by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, the national body charged with devising, administering and assessing qualifications in Scotland. These documents are:

- The one National Five (N5E, 2019) and two Higher Examination Papers (SQA HE1, 2019; HE2, 2019)—These examinations were taken by Scottish children in timed closed-book conditions in the summer of 2019. Although examination questions vary from year-to-year, these papers are typical.

- National Five (N5MI, 2019) and Higher Marking Instructions (HMI, 2019)—These documents are provided to the assessors who mark the examination papers. Their purpose is to ensure consistency between markers by giving clear guidance on what examinees should and should not be given credit for.

Although all the documents are drawn from a single year, there is considerable consistency in the style of questions posed by examiners from year-to-year. Thus, 2019 is simply a ‘typical’ years assessments. A sample which drew on documents from a longer period was considered, but this was rejected. Firstly, because the similarity of questions from year-to-year obviated the need to do this. Secondly, because doing so could be considered less methodologically-rigorous, opening the door to the accusation that examples were being cherry-picked from a pool of potential questions.

A systematic process of analysis was undertaken in which each question was read in turn followed by the marking instructions for the same question. Each question was analysed with the open question, ‘what understanding of the social world is being called up by this question?’. Many examination questions drew a nil response to this because they were merely informational (e.g. ‘Describe, in detail, two devolved matters the Scottish Parliament has responsibility for’ (N5E, 2019, p. 2), while others bore more sustained analysis. In some cases, the question was the object of enquiry, in others it was the ‘model answer’ offered by examiners. Where analysis suggested that questions were underpinned by particular assumptions about the social world, these were coded and later collated to allow the paper to draw several examples together under the same thematic heading.

Modern studies as modernism studies – certainty and the syllabus

This section of the paper develops the argument that Modern Studies is underpinned by ontological and epistemic certainty. To be clear, this certainty is positivist, not dogmatist. Modern Studies does not claim that the truth is known about the social world, but it does rest on the view that the truth *can* be known. Two epistemic slippages will be explored: the conflation of what Bhaskar (2008) terms the real and the actual, and an idiosyncratic view of ‘reliability’ as a decontextualized attribute of a source. Taken individually, each of these slippages might be seen as epistemic carelessness but taken together they represent a particular ontology which underpins thinking elsewhere in the subject’s syllabus.

Conflation of the real, the actual and the empirical

At several points in the National 5 examination, candidates are offered an assertion that they must support with examples from their studies. Figure 1 gives the example of Question 16 from the 2019 National Five paper (N5E, 2019, p.12).

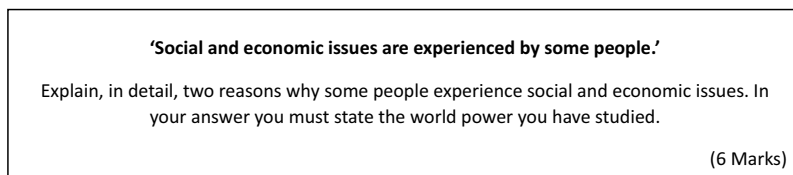


Figure 1. Question 16, National 5, 2019

Given the fact that students in different schools have studied different contexts, the broadness of the assertion is understandable—students must be able to respond with examples from any G20 country. But if the breadth of the question is understandable, its tortured phrasing is not. The question asks about ‘social and economic issues’ by which it presumably means ‘problem’ or

‘difficulty’, but why are these only ‘experienced by *some* people’? Surely *all* people *experience* some social or economic ‘issues’, albeit different issues and in different ways. A billionaire experiences economic inequality as she rides in a helicopter above a shanty town, but so, too, do the residents below. A heroin addict is ‘experiencing’ the ‘issue’ of drug dependency, but so, too, is the millionaire who finds discarded syringes on lawns of his gated mansion. This is not meant to be facetious. There is, of course, no equivalence between the kinds of hypothetical experiences described here, but they are all, nevertheless, *social problems experienced by some people*.

The marking instructions provide insight into what examiners expect from students. The following is offered as a model response,

One reason why some people are more likely to experience social inequalities [in the USA] is discrimination. Blacks are often paid less than white workers even when they do the same job. For example, in the USA, the pay gap is approximately 30%. (N5MI, 2019, p. 32)

The change in language here is subtle but important. While the question asks about ‘some people’ ‘experiencing’ ‘social and economic issues’, the model answer offers something else entirely—an answer to the question why some *groups* in society might be *more likely* to encounter social and economic difficulty. These are not the same thing.

Bhaskar’s realist theory of science can help highlight the significance of the semantic shift between the question posed and the model answer. Bhaskar (2008, pp. 46–47) writes of ‘three overlapping domains of reality: the real, the actual and the empirical (see Table 1). Crucially, these are not separate realities, but dimensions of reality to which different kinds or epistemic approaches give access. The apple falling and the force of gravity are part of the same reality, but the apple can be experienced while the gravitational mechanism can only be conceived theoretically. Experiences are instantiations of the empirical whereas co-existing realities can differ quite markedly.

The question is settled explicitly in the domain of the empirical, asking specifically about the ‘experience’ of social issues. However, in order to gain full marks, students must move beyond this to discuss the actual (the pay gap of 30%) and the real (the existence of discrimination). The question, therefore, is not about experience at all, but about a particular set of quantifiable events and invisible mechanisms which lie behind it. The point here is not to challenge whether the pay gap exists or the extent to which discrimination explains it, but to challenge the unproblematic reification of these in the framing of the question.

This problem is further highlighted with reference to other ‘issues’ that the syllabus permits students to discuss. Students may, for example, discuss ‘experience’ of the ‘issue’ of ‘variations in educational attainment’. But one cannot ‘experience’ *variations*; by definition, variations only ‘exist’ at a cohort level once one’s attainment is compared to others. Variations in attainment are not experiences, but statistical trends which emerge once a positivist empiricist stance is adopted. Similarly, students can write about the ‘issue’ of ‘lone parenthood’ – but it is not the experience of lone parenthood which matters to the question setter, it is the social stigma attached to it and the lack of government support which creates cohort-level inequality.

It is also significant that students are directed to ‘state the world power you have studied’. Immediately, the question precludes the student’s personal experience of these. A student from India in a Scottish classroom who has studied, say, the USA as a World Power must respond

Table 1. Bhaskar’s (2008) three overlapping domains of reality.

| | Domain of the real | Domain of the actual | Domain of the empirical |
|-------------|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Mechanisms | √ | | |
| Events | √ | √ | |
| Experiences | √ | √ | √ |

about the USA which s/he might never have visited and not India where s/he has direct personal experience of these 'issues'. In this framing, social issues become objects of study, rather than a thing that might be experienced personally by a student.

These are not semantic differences, they are ontological. The question superficially centres the lived experience of people experiencing 'issues' within society but these experiences are not credited, only statistical trends and social scientific explanations. This is a particular view of the social world: one in which certain phenomena are objective and measurable, passively experienced by subjects.

Figure 2 shows another example of the same type of question and the same ontological confusion, but in the opposite direction (NSE, 2019, p. 8).

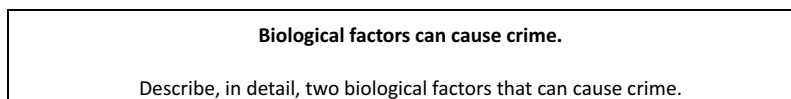


Figure 2. Question 11, National 5, 2019

The supposition of the question recalls the nineteenth century pseudoscientific fad for physiognomy and Lombroso's contention that there existed a kind of reverse evolution towards a more simian subspecies. In requiring students to argue in favour of a supposition which is dubious (at best) and eugenicist (at worst), this question is ethically unacceptable.² Students are given no opportunity to challenge the validity of the statement (or its ethical implications), instead the existence of biological factors in causing crime is simply asserted as true, and students are charged with explaining this. This question exemplifies what Zupancic (cited in (Fisher, 2008, pp. 17–18)) calls the 'reality principle' in which 'ideology presents itself as empirical fact or (biological or economic ...) necessity (and that we tend to perceive as non-ideological)'. Zupancic adds, 'it is precisely here that we should be most alert to the functioning of ideology'. Modern Studies students are not, however, afforded the opportunity to be 'alert to the functioning of ideology'. Instead, they must somehow explain how biological factors might explain a socially-constructed phenomenon—the commission of acts that a given society or legal system deems criminal.

As alarming as this is, the model answer offered by marking scheme implies that the authors of the examination paper do not themselves believe in such an unproblematic link between biology and criminality (NSMI, 2019, p. 21). The following is described as an 'accurate point with development and exemplification'.

Some people believe that criminals are 'born evil' and that they are physiologically distinct from non-criminals. For example, they would argue that criminals have no choice, it is 'nature' and they have no control over it.

In opening by saying 'some people believe', the model answer dissociates itself from biological determinism, but in doing so it avoids the actual question that was originally posed, viz. 'describe, in detail, biological factors that can cause crime'. The marking instructions do not, then, distinguish between the realist truth claim of the question (that biology can cause crime) and the opinions held by 'some people'. In Bhaskarian terms, the question adopts a certainty about the relationship between the empirical/actual domain (the existence of crime) and the domain of the real (biological factors as a causal mechanism). In contrast the model answer seems much less certain of this. Instead, of being 'real' causal mechanisms 'biological causes of crime' are relegated to the empirical, they become merely something that 'some people believe'. It is, of course, reassuring that students are not taught about an unproblematic relationship between biology in criminality, but this makes us ask why they are asked to 'explain' this dubious explanation, rather than merely identifying it as an attitude that some people believe.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 are, therefore, examples of the same ontological slippage but in opposite directions. Figure 1 asks about ‘experience’ but awards marks for putative mechanisms; Figure 2 presents a causal mechanism as objectively true, but awards marks for subjective statements of opinion.

Reliability as an empty signifier

This ontological confusion between the observable empirical domain and the ‘real’ is compounded by an idiosyncratic conceptualization of reliability, which implies that source reliability is a quality inherent in the source, rather than a judgement made before using a source as evidence. In doing so Modern Studies adopts a certainist stance in which some sources of information—those using numerical data, and those produced from positions of authority—are *a priori* ‘more reliable’ than others, irrespective of the accuracy of claims made.

Students understanding of reliability is assessed in the final question of the Higher Paper 2. The example in Figure 3 from 2019 is fairly typical (HE2, 2019, p. 9). It presents three sources followed by a question.

- Source A: a pie chart by the polling company Ipsos Mori on support for Scottish Independence;
- Source B: a photograph of the Vote Leave Bus from the 2016 Brexit referendum; and
- Source C: a 2017 election leaflet from the Green Party in the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency.

Attempt the following question, using only the information in Sources A, B and C above.

To what extent are Sources A, B and C reliable?

You must provide an overall conclusion on the most reliable source of information

Figure 3. Question 3, Higher Paper 2, 2019

This question implies that reliability a *quality* that sources ‘have’ to varying degrees. But reliability is not a quality of a source, rather it is the extent to which a source should be relied upon to provide trustworthy information about a *particular question*. As Ashby (2017, p. 148) writes, ‘It is not possible to determine the value, usefulness, utility or reliability of a source ... independently of the use to which we want to put it as evidence’. Instead of ‘reliability’, perhaps the question means, instead, to ask about the *validity* of the sources; that is, how well they sources help us to understand the phenomena being studied. But, if this is the case, the question still must be clearer about validity *for what*. Whatever the veracity of the *claims* on the side of a Brexit battle bus, the photograph shown in Source B is, nevertheless, a *very valid* source about electoral tactics of the Leave campaign during the 2016 Brexit referendum. Whether asking about validity or reliability, these concepts make sense only in relation to a clearly defined line of enquiry, not as universal concepts.

There are two further problems. First, by insisting that students use ‘only the information in sources A, B and C’, the examination forbids students from bringing their knowledge of a topic to informational claims. Is the claim made in Source C that the Green Party won 12% of the vote in 2016 true or not? If not, this is surely fatal to its reliability. Reliability must entail truthfulness. Second, it is telling that the sources relate to three entirely different contexts meaning that students are unable to compare the claims that the different sources make. Instead, students must judge the reliability of the source, solely with reference to the source itself. Wineberg (2018) has termed this approach to source analysis ‘vertical reading’, something he contrasts unfavourably with ‘lateral reading’ – the

cross-checking of sources with other sources to gauge reliability. Weinberg is clear that lateral reading allows readers to reach warranted conclusions faster than vertical reading, and that the ability to read laterally is probably the key critical thinking skill in the internet age.

Modern studies as modernity studies – systemacity and the syllabus

This section of the paper develops the argument that Modern Studies is underpinned by particular assumptions about the rationality of the modern liberal capitalist state. In Modern Studies, liberal democracies are modern because they are systematic - this is not a minimalist defence of the rule-of-law, but a maximalist celebration of Weberian means — end rationality in political decision making. Modern Studies encourages a deracinated view of politics in which decision-making simply becomes the most efficient or rational way of achieving an unproblematic end. In a second example from a Higher examination paper, it becomes clear that the ability to think within closed systems is valorized as proxy for objectivity, itself a value about which Weber was sceptical.

Valorisation of means-end rationality

Weber argues that modern and pre-modern societies are characterized by two contrasting notions of reason. Pre-Modern societies in which the social world was explained in magical or religious terms adopted values-rationality (*Wertrationalität*) in which an action was rational if it conformed to a particular spiritual or ethical ideal. The modern world, in contrast, adopted means-end rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) in which an action is judged rational if it achieved a stated end by the most efficient means. Weber was clear that this shift from *Wertrationalität* to *Zweckrationalität* was both a cause and effect of 'disenchantment with the world. In his famous formulation, 'as intellectualism suppresses belief in magic, the world's processes become disenchanted, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply "are" and "happen" but no longer signify anything' (Weber & Fischhoff, 1922, p. 125).

The Modern Studies syllabus actively encourages means-end rationality and discourages students from employing value-end thinking, while portraying such thinking as analogous to epistemic rigour. The final question of the National 5 examination paper (Figure 4) asks students to choose between two fictitious candidates who are running for a given office. The students are provided with contextual information to help support their decision. In 2019, students were asked to imagine that they were a member of an imaginary NGO (International Emergency Relief, IER) trying to elect a new CEO.

You must decide which option to recommend, either James Peddie (Option 1) or Elizabeth Sharp (Option 2).

- (i) Using Sources 1, 2 and 3, which option would you choose?
- (ii) Give reasons to support your choice.
- (iii) Explain why you did not choose the other option.

Your answer must be based on all three sources.

Figure 4. Question 21, National 5, 2019

Crucially, the quality of the answer is to be judged only on the candidates' use of three sources presented, rather than any ethical reasoning or values-rationality. Once again, the model answers in the marking instructions (Figure 5) give an indication of what examiners are looking for:

'I rejected option 1 because James Peddie says, 'Women's Rights: Ensuring women have equal access to all areas of life and work across the globe' should be a priority but Source 2 shows that this has the highest number of people disagreeing in comparison to the other priorities.'

(2 marks — evidence linked from Source 1 and Source 2)

Figure 5. Marking Instructions for Question 21, National Five, 2019,

This 'model answer' turns an ethical question into an informational one. The student is credited for linking two sources together and concluding that James Peddie is wrong to favour women's rights as a priority for the imaginary NGO. Crucially, the candidate would not receive credit for arguing that s/he supports Peddie because s/he agrees with him that women's rights should be a priority. The opportunity to use values-rationality (women's equality is important) to justify one's choice is barred; only means-end rationality (women's equality is unpopular) is credited.

This means-end view of democratic decision making in the examination echoes the evolution of party-political democracy in modernity. In the late twentieth century, the tendency of political parties to justify their programmes in terms of core values or the national interest was replaced by a search for the centre ground. The electoral success of Blair and Clinton appeared to confirm the view that democratic politics was a process of 'triangulation', of 'what works, and of "meeting voters where they are". The synecdochic phrase "focus group politics" has perfectly captured the logic of this period. In this new science of political campaigning meant that the appropriateness of policies was against the "end" of electability, rather than the "values" of equality or national interest. The irony, of course, is that Scottish students are being schooled in Giddens' Third Way thinking, just as voters seem to be rejecting the mythical 'centre ground'. The following extract from a Modern Studies teacher writing a decade before Blair's election suggests that concerns about the implications of Modern Studies purported 'neutrality' are not new.

A curriculum which is passive in style, concentrates heavily on 'civics' and the mechanics of formal government, appears to avoid certain controversial topics, and above all presents a centrist view of a pluralist consensus society with a democracy to match'. (Lawrie, 1987, p. 345)

For Weber, the triumph of means-end rationality in modernity led inexorably to nihilism because it provided a convenient excuse for avoiding confronting moral dilemmas, but he was unequivocal that it need not be so: 'An attitude of moral indifference has no connection with scientific objectivity' (1949, p. 60). In contrast, Modern Studies explicitly rejects the moral. In the Modern Studies marking instructions, to make moral claims is to be unscientific, and to be unscientific is to be irrational. In 'Science as Vocation' (Weber, 1946), Weber was strident in his condemnation of this line of thought, arguing that it was doubly compromised: initially because it could make no meaningful contribution to our understanding of society, but more importantly, because it fed the delusion that we could control it through systemacity and rational calculation. More worryingly, disenchantment created a positive feedback loop. As bureaucratization became an end-in-itself, modernity became little more than the search for more efficient ways of achieving efficiency.

Objectivity as ignorance

A similar view of the value of closed systems can be seen in the syllabus's conception of objectivity. Figure 6 reproduces a question from 2019 which presented two unattributed sources discussing nuclear weapons.

Attempt the following question, using only the information in Sources A and B.

To what extent is it accurate to state that efforts to reduce the threat posed by nuclear weapons have been successful?

Figure 6. Question 2, Higher Paper 2, 2019

The question asks the candidate to judge the *accuracy* of a statement (efforts to reduce the nuclear threat) but candidates are restricted to using only the two sources provided. This makes little sense. Candidates cannot reach a reasoned judgement on the *relative success of disarmament* based on two attributed sources (and nor should they be expected to). Candidates *can* reach a judgement on the *sufficiency* of the sources in supporting an interpretation ('To what extent do these sources support the view that ...') but this is not what the question asks.

This is something more than a clumsily worded question. The question frames objectivity as adopting a position of elective ignorance; one is 'objective' insofar as one does not bring any perspective or information from the actually-existing world. In doing so, it calls to mind Gadamer's critique that, 'the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself' (Gadamer, 1989, p. 273). As he explains in *Truth and Method*, there can be no interpretation outside the interpreter; prejudices are not methodological pollutants but an inevitable and integral part of the hermeneutic process.

Instead, Modern Studies adopts a simplistic positivist faith in method. To be objective is to be systematic; to make judgements about the world solely based on the information immediately available at that time. This may or may not be a useful intellectual exercise, but it is emphatically not the same as objectivity.

Modern studies as contemporality studies—the clean slate syllabus

The 'Modernity' of Modern Studies is one that Weber would have recognized: states are 'modern' insofar as they are guided by rational, bureaucratic systems. However, while Weber was explicitly critical of the disenchantment which both defined and fed this modernity, Modern Studies celebrates this as progress from an irrational pre-modern values-oriented world. This notion of progress calls to mind another scholar of the relationship between reason and modernity: Hegel.

Like many great thinkers, Hegel has the misfortune of being associated with a misinterpreted epithet. His famous claim that—What is rational is actual, what is actual is rational—has been interpreted as an uncritical defence of the present, but he never intended it as such (Kervegan, 2018). For Hegel, something was 'rational' if it was understood as 'rational' according to the *zeitgeist* of the time. Since this *zeitgeist* was the product of the historical dialectic, social arrangements were rational in the sense that they enjoyed broad popular support and that they possessed a logic that could be read in hindsight.

Modern Studies adopts a bastardized form of this Hegelian argument. Whereas Hegel thought the historical dialectic could be used to explain the 'rationality' of institutions in the present, for Modern Studies, discussion of how things 'came to be' is explicitly beyond its scope. In the syllabus, it matters only that Britain *is* a democracy, not how it came to be so. Students are required to describe Britain's constitution, the branches of government, rights and responsibilities and 'the strengths and weaknesses of this system' (SQA, 2019b, p. 4). They do not, however, learn about how this system emerged. Democracy in Britain is an inevitability; its inevitability proven by the fact that Britain *is* a democracy. The circularity is obvious. The actual is rational but not in terms that Hegel would have recognized.

The rejection of history can perhaps be explained in practical terms: Modern Studies has carved a curricular niche and cannot be seen to ‘tread on the toes’ of the history curriculum. But even if a practical explanation lies behind syllabus design, ahistoricism has ontological effects. Democracy in Britain was not inevitable, it was repeatedly fought for and *resisted*. The story of democracy is not one of inevitability, but one in which democrats – from the Levellers to the Chartists, from Asquith to Pankhurst – battled the forces of reaction. Without the historical perspective, Modern Studies adopts unreflexive modernism as its ontology: an alignment between the world-as-it-is and the world as-it-should-be. This is not to say that Modern Studies suggests the world is perfect as it is, but that Modern Studies closes off opportunities to think about how it might have been (or might be) different.

The two examples from examinations explored below show how existing social arrangements—Capitalist economic doxa and Western military hegemony—are presented uncritically as simply features of the world. Modern Studies does not openly advocate for these arrangements, but instead presents them as simply facts about the world, the limits of the possible.

Capitalist realism—the capitalist state as a rational state

This unproblematic ontological acceptance of the ‘world as-it-is’ extends from the political to the economic. Consider the question in [Figure 7](#):

‘The private sector has a role to play in tackling social and economic inequality.’

Explain, in detail, why the private sector has been successful in tackling social and economic inequality.

You should give a maximum of three reasons in your answer.

(8 Marks)

Figure 7. Question 10, National 5, 2019

The statement in bold is offered as an unattributed political opinion, but this is followed by a ‘question’ which compels students to provide justification for a far more controversial and far-reaching claim. The question does not ask the candidate to give examples of *attempts* or *approaches* by the private sector to tackle inequality and evaluate the effectiveness of these; rather candidates must *explain why* the private sector *has been successful* in tackling inequality. Success is taken for granted, it needs only to be explained. Students are not given any opportunity to make the fairly obvious point that inequality persists and therefore has not been ‘successfully tackled’. The more developed point that low wages and insecure contracts in the ‘private sector’ (however defined) might be *contributing* to the inequality that it is supposedly ‘tackling’ is even further obscured. In simple terms, students are not encouraged—or even permitted—to think beyond the narrow confines of the capitalistic mixed economy.

In focusing on the temporality of the present, the existing economic system is reified. It is not, in Hegelian terms, a product of historical processes or, in Weberian terms, habits of mind which emerged in the Reformation, it simply *is*. Fisher’s (2008, p. 16) concept of capitalist realism captures the underlying assumptions of this ahistorical deracinated approach to economic analysis ‘a pervasive atmosphere ... acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action’.

Western hegemony as rational

A similar ahistoricism is at play in the syllabuses' discussion of world affairs. Consider question in Figure 8 which adopts the familiar statement plus explanation structure.

| |
|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;">World powers can have a military influence on other countries.</p> <p>Describe, in detail, two ways the world power you have studied can have a military influence on other countries.</p> <p>In your answer you must state the world power you have studied.</p> |
|---|

Figure 8. Question 15, National 5, 2019

The question is studiously neutral, the marking instructions (Figure 9) much less so.

| |
|--|
| <p>Possible approaches to answering the question</p> <p>Russia Russia has had military influence by supporting the Assad regime in the Syrian conflict. (1 mark — accurate but undeveloped point)</p> <p>Russia has had military influence by supporting the Assad regime in the Syrian conflict. Russia carried out airstrikes against militant groups opposed to the Syrian government. (2 marks — accurate point with development)</p> <p>USA America has military bases across the world in order to support their allies against any threat. (1 mark — accurate but undeveloped point)</p> <p>America has military bases across the world in order to support their allies against any threat. These bases ensure a rapid response to any perceived threat, for example from Russia. (2 marks — accurate point with development)</p> |
|--|

Figure 9. Marking Instructions for Question 15, National 5, 2019

The marking instructions take two world powers (Russia and the US) who are involved militarily with countries with whom they are allied, but the description of this military influence differs markedly. The USA 'supports its allies' while Russia 'supports the Assad regime'. Russia 'carries out airstrikes' while the USA has bases to 'ensure a rapid response to any perceived threat'. The language used here is not neutral. The USA is portrayed as a benign defensive protector which 'responds to threats' while Russia is portrayed as an aggressor which 'supports regimes'. My point is not to defend Russia's foreign policy, but to point out the difference in the *rationality* that the syllabus attributes to foreign policy of the two countries. US foreign policy is rational, aimed at preserving a fragile world order; Russian foreign policy is aggressive and inexplicable. Such a view is only supportable from an ahistorical perspective which disregards recent US aggression in Iraq and elsewhere, and which studiously avoids ongoing US support for regimes which disregard the rule of law. Badiou could have been thinking of Modern Studies when he wrote that, 'modernization is the name for a strict and servile definition of the possible' Badiou (2008, p. 50).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has adopted Toulmin's three pillars of modernity (certainty, systemacity and clean slate thinking) as an organizing frame for an analysis of Modern Studies. It has argued that these three pillars standalone, but that they also create a chain of formal reasoning which underpins an entire *weltanschauung*: *Because we have tools to know the world (certainty), we have built more efficient systems which have rationally replaced less efficient practices (systemacity). Since this world as-it-is is entirely rational, it be studied in rationalist terms without understanding its historical contingency (clean slate)*. However, the emergence of this uncritical modernist doxa must, itself, be understood in historical terms.

The first Modern Studies students sat their examination in 1962, the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis. There was a bipolar world and students were required to understand 'The USSR and USA as World Powers and Problems of Co-existence' (Salomon, 1977). The world of 1962 offered two totalizing teleologies for 'reading' the present, capitalism and communism were competing narratives that students could comprehend and apply. With the collapse of the USSR came the collapse of one of these teleologies. History, as far as Fukuyama (and Modern Studies) was concerned, had ended. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Modern Studies lost its only resource for critique—a potentially critical subject became a descriptive one. The post-Communist world is marked by the invisibility of ideology and the hegemony of liberal capitalist rationalism. Modern Studies has adopted this ideology without anyone being aware of it. But Modern Studies is not oblivious to change. Questions focused on 'reliability' suggest that it knows students live in a relativistic world. But in the absence of critique, it falls back on the knowability of a single positivist truth, the rationality of systems and an implicit defence of the status quo.

Weber is surely correct when he identifies unreflective rationalism as the hallmark of modernity. In Weber's lifetime, he saw imperial expansion by European powers justified as modernizing missions, but he also lived long enough to see World War One disabuse them of such hubris. In the decades after Weber's death, Soviet Collectivism, justified by the rhetoric of efficiency and modernity, claimed millions of lives. Children studying Modern Studies in 2024 can add the 'civilizing' invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the continued death spiral of extractivist capitalism to the charge sheet. The conclusion is simple. Modern Studies is failing in its duty to young people if it does not encourage young people to reflexively critique the epistemic arrogance of modernism itself.

Modern studies in the past, present and future

In Graham Swift's (1983) novel, *Waterland*, the protagonist describes an interjection by Price, an apathetic student during a lesson on the French Revolution,

What matters', [Price] went on ... 'is the here and now, Not the past. The here and now – and the future'. (the very sentiments, Price – but you didn't see that – of 1789.) And then – alluding very rapidly to certain topics of the day (the Afghan Crisis, the Tehran hostages, the perilous and apparently unhaltable build-up of nuclear arms) ... he announced ... 'The only important thing about history, I think sir, is that it's got to a point where it's probably about to end. (pp. 12–13)

How the teacher responds to Price's challenge in the remainder of the book is instructive. Swift does not have his teacher dismiss the validity of the student's concerns, nor does he attempt a factual rebuttal of them; after all, it is only hindsight that tells us that Price was mistaken in his prediction of Armageddon (or, should we say, its timing). Instead, Swift's teacher focuses his ire on 'the sentiments of 1789', on the idea that we live in an especially enlightened age, that we are uniquely placed to shape the future, that history moves with a predictable linearity and that the causes of events can be analysed and explained. He reasserts the superiority of stories over data, of narrative over explanation. An approach, incidentally, which convinces his employers that he has lost his mind and hastens his dismissal.

A subject focused on current politics and world affairs will always have an important place in the school curriculum but studying the ‘modern world’ does not mean the uncritical application of modernism (Swift’s ‘sentiments of 1789’). Modern Studies today purports to be objective and neutral, but such terms are simply cover for an insufficiently critical stance towards knowledge-construction and capitalist hegemony. What, then, would a post-modern Modern Studies look like? Is such a thing possible without opening the door to relativism (the nihilism of Modernity arrived at from the opposite direction?) In short, what is required is a more critical and reflective stance towards Modernity?

I would like to suggest four possible avenues for development, two epistemic and two temporal. While lack of space prevents a full exploration of these, I believe they offer fruitful areas for debate. To be clear, these are not questions that necessarily should be posed to students—many are far too complex—instead, they are questions which should occupy researchers, teachers and curriculum developers in Modern Studies.

- *Ontoepistemic critique* – Modern Studies should challenge positivism and scientism as superior regimes of truth and means-end rationality as the best determiner of wise action. This does not mean that Modern Studies should necessarily embrace relativism, but there must be opportunities for students to challenge the assumption that the answers to contemporary questions are merely informational: there are, in fact, few contemporary questions that can be solved by knowing more or ‘educating the ignorant’. Tricky problems are intractable because they speak to powerful conflicting narratives—whether economic (growth vs sustainability), political (freedom vs equity) or ideological. We all *believe* things are not empirically verifiable—values never are—but it does children a disservice to pretend that we can be educated out of our beliefs or that reliable data can provide a meaningful guide to right action.
- *Post-colonial critique* - Students might consider the approaches taken to ‘modern’ questions in non-Western paradigms. Eurocentrism is too readily taken for granted in the Modern Studies with the clumsily titled unit on ‘underdevelopment in Africa’ (N5MI, 2019, p. 37) only the most egregious example. Instead of an approach which sees Africa in need of ‘development’, the syllabus could ask students to look at contemporary problems from a Western liberal paradigm and through ubuntu-based epistemology (Letseka, 2015).
- *Historical Critique* – More explicit focus should be given to the historical events which led to the modern world in the manner of Foucault’s ‘History of the Present’ (Roth, 1981). This is not just about explaining the historical causes of specific contemporary conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War (which the existing syllabus already does) but about explaining the historical origins of much that is currently taken-for-granted about the social world—the emergence of democracy, capitalism, rationality, etc.
- *Projective Critique* – The climate crisis is the pre-eminent issue of our age as it catalyses so many other issues: raising global temperatures explain increased human migration, revanchist expansionism and political nativism. Global heating and its attendant problems are only set to worsen, yet the Modern Studies syllabus makes no mention of this as an issue. In 1962, the syllabus was in no doubt that ‘The USSR and USA as World Powers and Problems of Co-existence’ posed an existential threat to humanity, but in 2024 Modern Studies remains silent about an equally grave threat. Modern Studies must adopt a positionality which consider the implications of the decisions taken today on future generations.

Conclusion

The Modern Studies National Five syllabus asserts that the subject aims to ‘develop the skills to interpret and participate in the social and political processes they will encounter in their lives’, but this raises two questions for the prospective curriculum planner. First, is this a statement of purpose or a statement of outcome? In other words, have we reflected carefully enough on why it is

important for children to 'develop these skills' or are we simply assuming that these skills—which purportedly underpin modern liberal democracies—are self-evident goods? Second, what work is the word 'encounter' doing here? The word frames children as passive actors in an already existing world, it assumes a certain confidence about exactly what 'social and political processes' children will 'encounter'. For a subject which makes much of its currency and relevance, there is an underlying assumption that certain features of the human world will not and cannot change.

These are questions which resonate beyond Modern Studies, and beyond Scotland. In fact, these questions lie at the heart of educational movements around the world to decentre and decolonize the curriculum. The case of Modern Studies is unusual only in that it brings the fundamental curricular question of our time into sharp relief: Are we helping children by transmitting the Modernist credo that 'we can do better if we only know more'? This approach has not had a good track-record so far. To remain relevant, Modern Studies (and educational more generally) must abandon this ontological confidence and adopt a position of permanent epistemic reflexivity. It must embrace the inherent instability and unknowability of human affairs. We should not be afraid of offering children uncertainty in an uncertain world. As Arendt (1961, p. 196) writes, education

is where we decide whether we love our children enough not ... to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world

If Modern Studies mirrors the Eurocentric project of using certainty to build a better world, perhaps we should let young people give humility a try?

Notes

1. Goodson and Dowbiggin have argued that such organizations help secure the future of new subjects by allowing teaching 'to acquire the mystique of specialization which assures a monopoly of power, resources and prerogatives in a specific sphere of educational practice' (p.253).
2. Neurological conditions such as Alzheimer's can lead to increased aggression and violence, but society is understandably reluctant to decide these actions as 'criminal'.

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