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Week 2-

I would argue that periods are useful constructs for the study of history. They have the potential, when properly applied, to provide a conceptual framework that may generally summarize the social, political, and/or economic environment for any given place or collection of places. I do not think that those who use the term are as dogmatic about its definitional boundaries as are the term's detractors. If we use the years 1500 and1800 as the bookends of the early modern era, I would be surprised to find any serious scholar of history ignoring an event in say, 1492, that has implications stretching into the year 1500 and beyond as not part of the early modern period. The definition of the period should be the starting point for further investigation into a historical era or theme. Both Starn and Goldstone seem somewhat disappointed in the fact that they must read beyond a work's title to get a sense of the author's thesis.

Starn provides an interesting, if not a bit cynical, history of the evolution of the term early modern. His fundamental premise is that the definition of early modernity is so fluid as to be effectively meaningless: "To make a longer story short, we are by now the somewhat flustered heirs of a spate of early modernities." He provides an interesting perspective on the application of the term over the past 60 years, but his critique does not allow for a reasonable fluidity in the term's application in context. The existence of the early modern is predicated on the existence of the modern (as is the existence of the post-modern). Starn rightly backs away from Latour's pronouncement that "modernization has never occurred." He acknowledges the trend to subdivide "mega-periods," one of which is ostensibly the early modern, into smaller, more discrete units. This solution, however, does not abolish the term early modern. It only serves to provide a finer understanding of a small part of the period, either temporally or thematically. (I would categorize his use of the genealogy of concepts as a thematic subdivision of a period.)

It seems to me that Goldstone's opposition to the use of early modern as a discrete period is simplistic and fraught with straw men and faulty assumptions. He argues that it is false and misleading to apply the term early modern to areas outside Europe. That may very well be the case, but he fails to bring any evidence that the practice is widespread. Arguing that certain parallels may exist that could allow one to possibly apply the term to certain periods in Japan or parts of Latin America has absolutely no bearing on its use for the study of European history. His alarmism over the term early modern world is similarly unsubstantiated. To the extent the term is used, it is not applied globally, but it is used outside of the European context to compare or contrast a non-European location with Europe, where the term is appropriate and understood. Even Goldstone himself points to this comparative use of the term. His criticism of finding elements of early modern society outside Europe circa 1500-1850 is undermined by the linkage to modernity. Describing Europe, among other societies at various points in time, as Advanced Organic Societies (AOS) may be a wonderful way of making comparisons in technology and social structure across long periods of time and in diverse places, but it does not undermine the use of early modern to refer to a reasonably discrete period in Europe. In fact, to the extent that Europe is the exception rather than the rule, perhaps we should use AOS to describe periods outside Europe and use early modern solely in the European context. Ultimately, supplanting early modern with AOS does not deal with the question of periodicity. And while the idea of AOS may be of use in a sociological study

of comparative history, the use of discrete periods of time applied to a discrete location remains a valuable and valid analytical method.

This discussion of periods in history brings us to Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. It focuses on a number of social phenomena and beliefs in a sub-period. It does not focus on the entirety of the medieval era but rather on the aspects that are evident in the transitional period leading into the Renaissance. He argues that with the close of the middle ages, certain fundamental aspects of society change. For example, pride gives way to greed. But even in that case, the emergence of greed, the defining sin of the next era, takes place as early as the 12th century. The pessimism of the middle ages is contrasted by the happiness of the Renaissance. In contrast to Huizinga, more modern scholars have developed an understanding of the medieval period as a necessary precursor to the Renaissance. They have blurred the boundaries of the middle ages to a degree, but it is doubtful anyone would confuse Carolingian Europe with Renaissance Italy.