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MULTIPLE MODERNITIES OR VARIETIES OF MODERNITY?

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Multiple Modernities or Varieties of Modernity?¹

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Abstract

The paper offers a critical appraisal of the concept of multiple modernities that has been gaining ground in sociology during the past decade. It rejects this concept as both conceptually flawed and empirically unfounded, and it proposes an alternative concept, that of varieties of modernity, which is believed to be better able to address the former's substantive concerns, while at the same time permitting us to speak of modernity in the singular. The main source of inspiration for such an alternative concept is the varieties of capitalism paradigm guiding the new political economy literature, and one of its advantages over the multiple modernities paradigm is its focus on institutions, rather than vague, barely explicated notions of culture and cultural difference. However, a varieties of modernity approach that followed its lead would have to be much broader and more comprehensive, and would therefore be more difficult to develop and to apply, than the varieties of capitalism paradigm. But even if it ultimately proved infeasible, the very consideration of its methodological prerequisites would still promise to yield valuable insights for students of modernity.

1. Introduction

In the 1990s a new paradigm emerged in sociology to conceptualize the contemporary world: the concept of multiple modernities. The protagonists of the new paradigm share a number of key assumptions about the modern world, as well as a common aversion to the modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s which they claim provides an oversimplified, empirically incorrect and normatively questionable view of this world.² The main point of contention is the theory's premise that modernization is a homogenizing process, ultimately leading to the convergence of the societies undergoing it; another its alleged proclivity to equate one particular variant of modernity – that of “the” West or, narrower still, North America – with modernity itself by elevating it, as Björn Wittrock (2000: 54) put it, “to the status of a world historical yardstick”. Against both views, the critics

¹ Extended version of a paper presented at the ISA workshop “Global Challenges and Local Responses. Trends and Developments in Society and Sociology in Asia and Beyond” in Singapore, 14-16 March, and at the 32nd Congress of the German Sociological Association in Munich, October 4-8, 2004. Thanks are due to Daniel Chirot, Hing Ai Yun and Roxana Waterson for helpful suggestions and encouragement.

² For the purpose of this paper, I shall assume that it makes sense to speak of modernization theory in the singular even though no canonical version of the theory ever existed; there are only more or less influential authors who share a number of important premises. A concise summary of some common modernization theoretical assumptions can be found in Huntington 1971.

emphasize modern societies' diversity. Not only are there, according to these critics, several paths to modernity, but different historical trajectories and socio-cultural backgrounds also give rise to highly distinct forms of modernity in different parts of the world. In fact, even Europe, where it all began, exhibits a great deal of cultural and institutional diversity.

But is that really a new insight – and are (or were) modernization theorists not aware of it themselves? The question is not, at least cannot seriously be, whether there is diversity in the world. There certainly is. But what do we make of it? How *much* diversity is there? What *kinds* of diversity exist between different modern societies? How *profound* are the existing differences? What is their social theoretic *significance*? And what are their future prospects? Are they more likely to persist, to withstand further social change (“globalization”), perhaps even to deepen as a result of (resistance to) it, or do we have reason to expect that they will diminish in the long run? Moreover, if we all live in the modern era now, as in one sense we doubtless do, does this imply that all societies are equally modern? Or is modernity a matter of degree? What does it mean – or take – to be modern anyway?

To answer questions of this kind one needs a reasonably clear understanding of the concept of modernity – or modern society – itself. The literature on multiple modernities contributes little to this understanding; it only distances itself from what it takes to be the most objectionable views of modernization theory without offering an alternative definition or proposal. Instead it largely relies on an implicit notion of modernity which, when closely scrutinized, actually appears surprisingly similar to that underlying much of the work of modernization theorists, only thinner. Thus, whereas modernization theory aims to capture the *whole* structure of modern society and *all* aspects of the dramatic change processes that give rise to its emergence, the literature on multiple modernities focuses almost exclusively on *cultural* factors and the ways these are believed to frame *politics* and the *political order* (as though modernity was identical with its polity or with the modern state), as well as, in some instances, on *religion*.³ Not surprisingly, to the extent that a theory of modernity is outlined at all, it is a self-proclaimed cultural theory (see Taylor/Lee, no year).

In the pages ahead, I will first present a brief summary of some of the main points raised in the multiple modernities literature. This will be followed by a few critical remarks (section 2) and the

³ Is it here to stay rather than to disappear, as modernization theorists are alleged to claim, and does not the continued significance of religion in most parts of the world, except perhaps in some northwestern European countries, undermine the proposition that modernization leads to secularization (see, e.g., Hefner 1998; Spohn 2003)? It does of course not. For secularization does not necessarily imply the complete vanishing or disappearance of religion. It only implies its gradual separation from other spheres of society in which its views cannot claim paramount importance any more because the spheres (i.e., the economy, politics, the law, science, etc.) become structurally autonomous from religion and increasingly follow their own norms – an issue raised already by Max Weber in his notion of distinct “value spheres” and “life orders” (see Weber 1978).

suggestion of an alternative approach (section 3) that, while able to address many of the former's substantive concerns, avoids its most serious flaws. A brief conclusion (section 4) sums up what I believe can be learned from the effort to put this alternative approach to work.

2. Multiple Modernities: A Brief Discussion

One view that several authors working with the multiple modernities paradigm share is that modernity is first and foremost a cultural “program” – or more precisely, a multiplicity of such programs, not an institutional reality (Eisenstadt 2000a). Of course it is an institutional reality too, but this reality is itself grounded in, or gives expression to, a number of deep-seated “promissory notes”, as Wittrock (2000) calls them. Before the various revolutions that we associate with the rise of modernity in Europe – the industrial revolution, the urban revolution, the scientific revolution, the political revolution, the educational revolution – could take place, another revolution, the intellectual revolution, had to be accomplished. This intellectual revolution set the stage for a fundamental epistemic transformation that made the modern project possible in the first place.

At the core of this epistemic transformation lies the European enlightenment. It questions the givenness of social order and raises the awareness of its makeability, hence contingency. The concomitant delegitimation of traditional political and religious authority sets in motion a process which ultimately leads to the establishment of a radically different order, that of political democracy. In addition to the new political order, various other innovations give rise to new institutions which become emblematic of the modern world: the rule of law and a legally protected private sphere, the market economy, civil society, the freedom of thought and science, etc.

So far, the account – of which I am giving a much simplified version here for lack of space – is relatively uncontroversial and could probably be underwritten by several modernization theorists as well, even though they might place less emphasis on cultural factors and focus more on the socio-economic transformation of society, set in motion by the industrial revolution and the rise of the bourgeois class/demise of the aristocracy. They also have no problem accepting the proposition that modernization is a “continuous and open-ended process”, to use the words of Krishan Kumar (1999: 72), one of the few remaining contemporary sociologists who unambiguously embrace modernization theory. Conversely, the advocates of the multiple modernities approach agree with modernization theorists that the “project of modernity” (Habermas), once it had firmly taken root in the West, soon began to have global relevance and to spread to what is sometimes derogatively called the rest.⁴

⁴ Karl Marx was amongst the first social theorists to spell out the implications of the European transformations, which he believed to reflect a world historical turning point, for other parts of the world. As he put it in a famous phrase in *Capital* (1936: 13), “The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own

The main disagreements concern the consequences that modernization processes have for different societies. As mentioned before, modernization theorists claim that societies undergoing such processes tend to become more similar over time in their institutional outlooks and culture, whereas the critics from the multiple modernities camp insist on the prevalence of fundamental cultural and institutional differences despite modernization.⁵ The very refusal to speak of modernity in the singular, rather than of multiple modernities, alludes to this difference.

But how many modernities are there? At one level, the literature on multiple modernities seems to imply that there are as many modernities as there are modern – or modernized – societies (which tend to be equated with states in this literature). This reading is suggested by accounts of multiple modernities, such as that given by Wittrock, according to which there are not only many different varieties of modernity outside the Western hemisphere, but also within it. Thus, French modernity differs from German modernity differs from Scandinavian (or Nordic; see Strath 2004) modernity differs from English modernity differs from American modernity and so forth. But that is not really what the protagonists of the multiple modernities paradigm want to say, even though it would be fully consistent with some of their substantive claims about European or Western modernity.⁶ Their main point is that there are modernities *outside* the West that cannot be fully

future”. It is perhaps worth recalling that the specific target of this phrase was Germany, a late industrializing country whose development lagged significantly behind that of England, the leading European modernizer, during Marx’s lifetime. As Reinhard Bendix (1977: 410) commented roughly a century later, industrialization need not have exactly the same effects everywhere. But, he goes on to say, once it “has occurred anywhere, this fact alone alters the international environment of all other societies.” In other words, all countries will sooner or later have to react and adapt, “on pain of extinction”, as Marx and Engels said (perhaps somewhat over-dramatically) in the Communist Manifesto. Parsons’ “evolutionary universals” (see Parsons 1964) are one attempt to spell out the structural prerequisites of more or less successful adaptations.

⁵ Moreover, they distance themselves from any identification of modernization with Westernization – a popular ritual in social science discourse since the last quarter of the 20th century (Giddens 1990: 174f. is a rare exception). Given that there is little disagreement that most modern institutions, and particularly their combination, originate in “the” West, it is not clear whether the rejection of the Westernization thesis has a sound *social theoretic* basis or reflects instead primarily a *politically* motivated aversion to ill-founded notions of Western supremacy (moral and otherwise) which are doubtless detrimental to fostering levelheaded intercivilizational dialogue and exchange (as suggested, e.g., by the accounts of Therborn 2000 and some of the chapters in Sachsenmaier/Riedel 2002). But one should not confuse politics or diplomatic prudence with science.

understood in terms of the categories and concepts developed to make sense of *Western* modernity, or at least that do not and will not converge with the institutional forms and structures that modernity has come to adopt in the West. Modernity, on this view, crystallizes around major human civilizations, such as European (or Western, or Judeo-Christian) civilization, Japanese civilization, Sinic civilization, Indian (or Hindu) civilization, Islamic civilization, Latin American civilization, etc. (not unlike the typology offered by Huntington 1996), all of which leave their imprint on the institutions of society, giving them their peculiar shape and “color”, as it were.

As one can see, in some of the above cases culture and religion are blended, making them almost indistinguishable. That may well make sense – depending on the force that religion had or continues to have within the civilization in question.⁷ But does it make sense to speak of Japanese modernity as distinct from Western modernity? I doubt it. There are undeniably differences between contemporary Japan and contemporary Western countries, as much as there are many such differences between any group of countries originating from, or belonging to, other civilizations. The trouble with

much of the multiple modernities literature is that it does not really tell us a great deal about what recisely these differences consist in, how significant they are and why they might justify speaking of

⁶ To prevent misunderstandings I should perhaps say that I do not disagree with much of what (especially) Wittrock has to say about European diversity or the relatively late emergence of political democracy even in many parts of western Europe (although I also agree with Chirot that the differences that now exist between different parts of western Europe are fairly unspectacular; see Chirot 2001). The main point of contention concerns the conceptual conclusion to be drawn from the existence of this diversity.

⁷ See, for instance, Weiss 2003 on Islam in Pakistan, with special reference to its impact on (the local understanding, as well as manifold sabotage, of) women’s rights. See also Tabari 2003 on the way the power of the clergy impacts on the (lack of) separation of the law, politics and religion in Iran. But whatever one makes of instances such as these, the fusion of religion and all or most other institutional sectors of society is not commonly seen as indicating a high degree of modernity. As suggested in footnote 3, one of the constitutive features of modernity is precisely the “reduction” of religion to one amongst many “subsystems” (Luhmann) of society, none of which can claim superiority over all others.

modernity in the plural, rather than in the singular.⁸ But we need to know this to judge whether Japan – or the West or India or whichever region or country one may consider – is so unique as to justify, perhaps even warrant, the conceptualization of its institutional and cultural outlook in its own, and, what is more, even in *civilizational* terms – so different that something very important would be missed if Japan were treated as one of several members of a common family of modern societies. Is that really the case? For instance, is Japan significantly *more* different from Spain than Denmark or Britain or Greece are? And does contemporary Japan have more in common with *pre-modern* Japan than with, say, *contemporary* Canada or Germany?

Questions such as these would have to be answered in the affirmative to justify the language of multiple *modernities*, rather than varieties of *modernity*. If one agrees with the premise of modernization theory⁹ that the breakthrough to modernity is a genuinely revolutionary process, matched in historical significance only by the Neolithic revolution and radically transforming all aspects of life, then one would probably be hard put to accept such views. My own guess is that the answers depend on what precisely one looks at: on what is being compared across two or more social entities (which need not be states). The multiple modernities literature, however, does not even permit posing such questions as the very premises on which it rests imply that there *must* be greater variance across civilizational lines than across time, than across epochs in world history. And given that almost everyone agrees that modern society, be it in the singular or in the plural, differs from pre-modern societies, the *assumed* differences between the newly discovered multiple modernities must be very profound indeed. For if they were not, then there would be no sound basis for speaking of modernity in the plural – of modernities.

Defenders of the notion of multiple modernities might reply that I read too much into their accounts and that their aim is simply to highlight a number of cultural differences between different parts of the world that are easily missed when approaching the whole world as one, which modernization theory seems to do. But while it may well be that modernization theorists have a tendency to *underrate* existing differences, we should also guard against *overrating* them. In particular, we should be more specific about the exact nature of the differences that we claim to exist and about the reasons for their presumed magnitude.

⁸ See, for instance, Eisenstadt 2000b, which contains a long chapter on the adoption and reconfiguration of Western modernity in Japan, but nowhere outlines the details of the purported differences between Western and Japanese modernity. Instead, the book offers an historical account of how they emerged.

⁹ A premise well grounded in the “sociological tradition” (Nisbet 1966) and shared with practically all of the discipline’s classics, as it may be useful to recall.

I will now give a very brief outline of an alternative approach that, while permitting us to speak of modernity in the singular, at the same time leaves ample room for considering whichever differences between countries or world regions we have reason to emphasize.

3. Varieties of Modernity

As indicated above, I believe a better alternative to accommodate whichever differences may exist between different modern societies would be a concept of varieties of modernity rather than multiple modernities. The main source of inspiration for this proposal is the new political economy literature on “varieties of capitalism” (Hall/Soskice 2001; Streeck/Yamamura 2001; Yamamura/Streeck 2003). Like the multiple modernities literature, it emphasizes difference. However, the differences that it concerns itself with are seen as *family differences* within a common mode of societal (more specifically, economic) organization, that of modern capitalism.¹⁰ Moreover, they are first and foremost *institutional* differences, not cultural ones, even though their socio-historical embeddedness in particular cultural and political contexts is well traced and acknowledged. And finally, they *cut across* civilizational lines.

Two main versions – or varieties – of capitalism are discussed in this literature: “liberal” capitalism, exemplified most clearly by the Anglo-American brand of capitalism, on the one hand, and “coordinated” or “non-liberal” capitalism, of which Germany and Japan are taken to be the prime examples, on the other.¹¹ The differences that exist between them, as well as the comparative advantages/disadvantages they involve under conditions of an increasingly integrated world economy, are analyzed at great length, but need not interest us here. What makes this literature useful for present purposes is that it permits us to take existing differences seriously without giving them too much weight.

¹⁰ Might one not just as well refer to these differences by speaking of capitalisms instead of varieties of capitalism? One might, but then the more fundamental difference between modern and pre-modern capitalisms (that do indeed justify the use of the plural form) would be blurred. As Weber (1984) showed very clearly, capitalism *as such* is not a modern invention. But the form that capitalism takes under modern conditions makes it radically different from all earlier versions of capitalism. It is in keeping with this insight that it makes more sense to use the varieties of capitalism (capitalism in the singular!) language when conceptualizing differences among modern types of capitalism.

¹¹ Vivien Schmidt (2002) suggests a different categorization that generates at least three varieties of capitalism for Europe alone (“market”, “managed”, and “state-capitalism”, respectively). It is of course always debatable how fine- or coarse-grained one’s typologies should be, and the answer depends less on facts than on the purposes of one’s analyses and the questions one pursues and seeks to answer. For the case I wish to make here it does not matter whether there are two or more varieties of capitalism. I am in fact less interested in the substantive findings of this research than in its heuristic value for the development of a larger social theoretic approach which, while not excluding the economy, goes beyond it by aiming to cover the structure of modern society as a whole.

Interestingly, the approach also leads to a regrouping of countries – one that plausibly suggests there are several Western countries whose peculiar setup of *economic* institutions makes them more similar *in this respect* to an important Asian country, or civilization, than to several of their Western counterparts. Similar findings would likely emerge if one extended the analysis to other institutional sectors of society, such as various modern societies’ *social policy regimes*, their *political systems*, and others. Again, one could ask questions such as, is the Japanese welfare state more similar to that of Switzerland, the United States, Great Britain etc., as their common subsumption under the “liberal” regime type in Esping-Andersen’s work would imply (see Esping-Andersen 1990), or does it have more in common with either the German variant (on which it was initially modeled to a certain extent) on the one hand, and the East Asian “tigers” (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong) on the other, as suggested by the literature on Confucian welfare capitalism (e.g., Jones 1993)?¹² Or how about Hong Kong’s very liberal, laissez-faire capitalism? How much of its brand of welfare capitalism is peculiarly “Asian” or “East Asian”, and how much does it owe to imported Western models, given that the city’s long-term colonial rulers used it as playfield for trying out ideas whose implementation was not politically feasible at home (McLaughlin 1993)? Are the strongly familist and productivist orientations of East Asian welfare systems (Holliday 2000) regional peculiarities, reflecting deeply rooted cultural dispositions, or rather elements of a universal policy mix whose particular configuration and weight depends on political contingencies, such as the strength of labor movements, the stage of development (Hort/Kuhnle 2000), and other factors? If the former, then how do we explain that several continental European welfare systems are or were quite similar until recently? Next, we may look at Japanese – or South Korean, or Indian, or Chilean, or whichever – democracy. Are they all categories of their own or just particular variants of the three or four basic models (or types; see Kaiser 1997) of democracy found elsewhere in the world?¹³

What these few remarks suggest is that we must be very precise in our comparative analyses and that it is helpful to go beyond the study of vaguely defined cultures and civilizations and their historical rootedness. Of course we want to know how history and culture shape our institutions, but we should also be interested in analyzing their concrete form and functioning. Or to put it differently,

¹² It has been widely noted that the existence of a strong “developmentalist” state in all of the above East Asian late industrializers marks a further commonality – both among themselves and with, e.g., Germany. Needless to say, all six countries also share a common legacy of political authoritarianism, with economic liberalization (to the extent that it actually took place) generally preceding political liberalization (to the extent that this has actually been achieved).

¹³ Another important area of study would be different societies’ *legal systems*. As is well known, the legal systems of the United States or Britain and many continental European countries differ markedly (see Röhl 1997 for a succinct summary). But for the most part, they still tend to be viewed as varieties of a common modern mode of jurisdiction. Again, the question that needed to be answered would be whether the differences among Western countries’ legal systems are more, or less, profound than what distinguishes these systems as a group from the legal systems found in other, non-Western “modernities”.

what does it mean to say that South Africa or Japan or Brazil constitute different modernities, rather than different varieties, or different stages in the realization, of a common modern condition?

Consider, for example, the field of *science*. Does it take on a radically different shape in India or Egypt or Israel than, say, in Italy or Belgium or the Netherlands? The likely answer is that it depends on what one focuses on. If one focuses on the benchmarks used to measure the quality of output, then these will either be very much the same everywhere or marginalize countries opting for more parochial standards in the quest for attention on the publication markets. Scientific truths do not vary with the contexts in which they are produced – even though our accounts of these truths inevitably bear the imprint of the locality from which they derive (see Schmidt 2001).¹⁴ If, on the other hand, one were to focus on questions such as the organization of access to positions in the science sector, then one would probably find that this is more open (i.e., more based on purely technical criteria, signifying a higher degree of functional differentiation in the structure of society at large) in one group of countries than it is in another, and it may well be that there is a link between the two aspects as indicated by the success of the American science system which appears to be the most open in the world. Recognizing this link, other countries may (gradually) follow suit. Or lose out. Germany's system would be a case in point.¹⁵

Another example is *medicine* and the perceptions, rules and norms guiding medical practice. If they are, for all their local peculiarities, not radically different in non-Western societies from those prevailing in the West (at least less different than from what they were in the respective countries' pre-modern past), and if whichever differences remain have more to do with different economic capabilities than with fundamentally different conceptions of medicine, then what does this signify for notions of separate modernities?¹⁶ Why rule out the possibility that some of the societies in question are less modern than others, or are not (yet?) equally modernized throughout the entire structure of

¹⁴ His championing of a norm of value neutrality for the social sciences notwithstanding, even Weber (1988) was fully aware of this triviality. But that did not prevent him from embracing a concept of context-free truth without which he believed academic work would be scientifically useless.

¹⁵ German science, once the world leader in many disciplines, never recovered from the expulsion of Jewish scholars from the universities under the Nazi regime. There are doubtless several reasons for its decline, but this is clearly one of them.

¹⁶ Sometimes the diagnosis of uniqueness seems to be little more than a function of the limits of authors' horizons, choice of comparison units, linguistic capabilities, etc. An example is Margaret Lock's (2002) juxtaposition of Japanese and Anglo-American reactions to the concept of brain death that make the Japanese case appear rather exceptional. However, had she included Germany (and/or Switzerland) in her sample, then a wholly different picture would have emerged, as these countries' publics exhibited very similar reservations about the concept, resulting in similar legislative difficulties. At least the East-West divide constructed by her choice of research objects would thus have appeared much less pronounced.

society? And again, it would be hard to find institutional sectors of society not raising such questions.¹⁷

Wittrock has rightly pointed out that even western Europe has become fully modern in certain respects (e.g., in the political domain) only very recently. Thus, it took until the mid-1970s before Greece, Portugal and Spain finally switched to democracy, and until the 1990s before the last hurdle to universal suffrage was removed in the last Swiss canton. Why should similar points not hold for other regions, other societies, as well; across the board or in particular fields?¹⁸ In many African states and in much of South Asia girls are still systematically excluded from formal education, receive less health care than boys, and are generally considered less socially worthy than their male counterparts due to the persistence of pre-industrial value systems, as well as social structures supporting them (Drèze/Sen 1995). Are we to ignore that? If, on the other hand, a comparative analysis suggested a gradual (slow, uneven, often conflictual but nevertheless discernable) trend toward greater inclusion of females into the main institutional sectors of society around the world, then what would that imply? That other fields, in which more difference may prevail, are more important to determine the character of a given society? I doubt that such a claim could withstand critical scrutiny.

Another potentially damaging issue is this. The differences highlighted in the multiple modernities literature are almost always differences located at the cross-national or cross-civilizational level. However, we do find quite significant – even cultural – differences at the sub-national level as well. For instance, Putnam (1993), amongst several others, has demonstrated that there continue to be dramatic differences in economic and political performance between northern and southern Italy, rooted, in his view, in deep-seated social structural and cultural differences which in turn have been differently conducive to the development of a full-blown capitalist economy and a well functioning democratic polity. Similar differences have been observed in India, especially between Kerala, arguably the state that has gone furthest in dismantling pre-capitalist and semi-feudal structures of economic organization, and much of the rest of the country, resulting amongst others in levels of literacy and life expectancy that outperform not only those of all other Indian states, but also those of

¹⁷ Similar questions are raised by Chirot (2001: 345) who suggests “that seemingly irreconcilable cultural differences are more a product of different rates of modernization than of permanent cultural divisions”.

¹⁸ One example would be the very recent, in fact: still far from completed, extension of full citizen rights to long excluded or marginalized groups such as homosexuals, giving a new and more encompassing expression to the concept of equality (Phillips 1999). Citizenship, as O’Donnell (1993) has suggested, can come in different forms and with different degrees of “intensity”. Thus far, it has tended to be most intense in Western countries that began to modernize first. But that does not preclude the possibility of further “intensification” even there. It does suggest, however, that later modernizers are likely to come under pressure – from within or without – to extend their notion of citizenship sooner or later too.

many economically more advanced countries in Latin America and elsewhere (Heller 1999).¹⁹ Are these differences less significant than those existing between, say, Singapore and Luxembourg (or Berlin)²⁰ or Taiwan and Portugal – as one might be led to believe by a civilization-centered approach of multiple modernities? If yes, why? If no, does that mean that even single nation states may contain different (“multiple”) modernities within their borders? Or what does it mean instead? Why give so much weight to cross-national or cross-civilizational differences in the first place? The multiple modernities literature offers no compelling (if, indeed, any) answers to questions such as these.

We should also not reject modernization theory’s claims about homogenizing trends leading to convergence prematurely. If we define convergence carefully enough and avoid equating it with identity, then we may detect trends of convergence even in the very fields that the multiple modernities literature believes lend the strongest support to its premises: culture and politics. To begin with the first, consider the work of Ronald Inglehart and others drawing upon the World Values Survey (see Inglehart 1995; Inglehart/Baker 2000). This work suggests, to use Inglehart’s own words (1995: 381), “that economic modernization and cultural modernization tend to go together in coherent syndromes” around the world and that the more fundamental differences in worldviews are not among industrialized societies but rather between pre-industrial and industrial societies. Likewise, empirical work done within the framework of the world polity theory of John Meyer and others (e.g., Meyer et al. 1997) suggests that a world society organized around key structural commonalities is emerging due to the rapid spread of a global culture encouraging the adoption of similar institutions across the globe – whether they are functional or not. At the same time, we have good reason to believe that several of the tendencies that we now identify with Western modernity have only recently become widespread even in the West. For instance, Beck’s work on “reflexive modernization” (1986) has shown that individualization became a mass phenomenon in Germany only beginning in the 1960s – with the onset of the so-called economic miracle; similar observations have since been made about other Western countries. It has often been noted that “Asians” worldviews, personalities, value systems are less individualized than those of Westerners, and that their everyday moralities tend to be more community-oriented, more collectivist. But the West’s everyday morality was not much different in the past (see Phillips 1993). Can we rule out with certainty the possibility that today’s so-called “Asian

¹⁹ As one would expect (following modernization theoretical premises), this was accompanied by a significant decline in Kerala’s fertility rate which is now below the replacement level and almost half that for India as a whole (see Sen 1999: 199). One wonders what a culturalist approach emphasizing difference would make of this.

²⁰ It would seem to be more appropriate to compare Singapore to small states or cities of similar size at similar levels of development than to countries with a large (rural) hinterland, such as France. With Luxembourg, Singapore shares its political independence and statehood, with Berlin, a city-state within (and capitol of) the Federal Republic of Germany,

values” are more reminiscent of Europe’s morality of yesterday (Senghaas 1998) than reflections of deep-seated civilizational differences that are here to stay forever? After all, East Asia – the first non-Western region in the world to become fully modern (see Tu 2000) – began to modernize much later than the West. It would therefore not be surprising if many of the phenomena that we associate with modernity (or modernization) were to manifest themselves there later; and there are indeed signs that this is precisely what is happening (see, e.g., Jepperson 2002).²¹

How do such findings square with the notion of multiple modernities? If one cannot simply dismiss them as invalid, one must at least address the questions they raise for our understanding of modernity or modernities. But the literature on multiple modernities thus far does not appear to be taking notice of such ephemeral phenomena – not least because it seems to be much less concerned with the actual makeup of contemporary modern societies than with their historical paths into modernity, of which it says there were more than one. It would, however, be hard to find a modernization theorist who claimed otherwise. So one wonders about the targets of such enlightenment efforts.

Another seeming point of convergence is in the field of economics where policies are becoming increasingly more similar. Not only are there many more democracies in the world now than there were 50 years ago, but growing emphasis is also placed on the establishment of market economies and their requisite institutional infrastructures (Rodrick 2000). “As late as 1965”, writes Jeffrey Sachs (2000: 38f.), only the West, Japan and the four East Asian “tigers” (together representing just 21 percent of the world’s population) were thoroughly “capitalist in orientation”. With the collapse of socialism, the opening up of India and other transitions elsewhere, the picture has been

the population size (roughly 4 million as against 3.5 million people living in Berlin) and heterogeneity (e.g., both cities have sizeable Muslim minorities).

²¹ My own work (see Schmidt/Lim 2004) on the micro-politics of organ transplantation also lends at least tentative support to this hypothesis as it shows that many of the allocation practices presently observed in Singapore are remarkably similar to those prevailing in several Western countries (such as Germany and the United States) until very recently. Education policy would be another example. Anyone familiar with the top-down style of teaching at Singaporean primary and secondary schools will quickly be reminded that the same style dominated many Western education systems until after World War 2, often phased out only in the 1970s or even later (indeed, Germany is still struggling with a school system marred by pre-modern legacies). There are also other similarities. For instance, family structures are rapidly changing in East Asia due to high rates of female labor market participation. This has enhanced women’s bargaining power vis-à-vis their husbands on whom it makes them economically less dependent (Quah 2003). Thus patriarchal relations are increasingly challenged and divorce rates are rising. These may still be low by European or American standards, but the trend is clearly upward. Also, norms of filial piety are coming under strain, as two-generation households are becoming the norm. Perhaps more “traditional” values can be sustained in East Asia (longer) than has been the case in many Western countries (although that remains to be seen). But whatever their ultimate fate, what used to be seen as self-evident is now more and more subjected to the erosive forces of doubt and questioning.

rapidly changing over the course of the past 15 years or so. Now, the majority of the world's population lives either under capitalist economic institutions or in countries moving toward their introduction and consolidation. The outcomes of these transformations are anything but certain or even. Nor are they painless. Yet, it is hard to deny that they indicate some movement in common directions, over the long haul reducing divergence across countries or civilizations.²²

Globally, this process has enormous implications. One of them seems to be the reversal of a trend of growing economic inequality between world regions that began roughly two centuries ago with the industrialization of Europe and now seems to have reached a turning point shifting the locus of inequality growth back to the national level, from between-nation to within-nation inequality,²³ and thus leading to a new geography of inequality, due to the increasing economic potency of late industrializing countries, especially of China (Firebaugh 2003). China's phenomenal rise over the past quarter century has not only been the key force behind reducing the world's poverty level²⁴ from more than half of all people 50 years ago to roughly 20 per cent of the world population today, it also means that, for the first time in human history, a majority of the world's population will soon live under genuinely modern conditions. China is modernizing more rapidly than any other country in the world has ever before, and its modernization will very likely change the world's face radically. The country will soon overtake Germany as the third largest economy, and it will eventually become the world's number one, thus "regaining the historical position that it lost in the middle of the nineteenth century" (Qian 2003: 298) – provided present growth levels can be sustained or at least kept sufficiently high. As a result, it will also become politically more powerful than it already is. And even though it will in many ways remain different from the contemporary West, it will also become more like it in numerous respects (social structurally and otherwise). For instance, we do not know whether China will ever switch to a democratic political system, and even if it does, the kind of democracy it may establish can differ significantly from Western-type democracies (see Bell 2000 for an interesting proposal). But it

²² In line with a hotly contested argument of Wilensky (1975), another convergence appears to be the establishment of some mechanisms of collective, state-run or -regulated welfare provision in virtually all countries that grow rich as a result of successful marketization of their economies. Obviously, such mechanisms do not fall like manna from heaven, and it is doubtless true that their form (as well as their size and "generosity") owes a great deal to the way they come into being (as action or conflict theorists are prone to insist). But that does not invalidate the argument itself. It only qualifies it.

²³ Growing income inequality within nations has been a worldwide phenomenon during the past two decades, affecting even Japan (where the income dispersion was much more compressed after World War 2 than in several other OECD-countries) and apparently moving it closer to the distribution patterns prevailing in the United States (see Ohtake 1999; Sato 2001). Might this be a sign of convergence?

²⁴ Based on the World Bank's standard of having to live on the equivalent of less than a dollar per day; see UNDP Annual Report 2003.

is already in the process of strengthening the legal-bureaucratic type of political authority which Weber believed to be an indispensable prerequisite of successful economic modernization, and if eventually it were to adopt a genuine form a democracy, then modernized China would over time become more similar to the West than it was before it embarked on this route – a scenario very much in line with the propositions of modernization theory. Restrictions on the freedoms of thought and opinion, as well as that of science, while far from negligible, have already been eased and will likely be further eased, even though setbacks are always possible. In 2004 China amended its constitution to grant a formal right to ownership of private property, an institution without historical roots in Chinese culture, but needed to fuel the private business sector driving China's economic growth. Again, the trends speak for growing convergence – even though, to repeat that truism, convergence need not and likely will not mean identity.

One could go on like this, but the point I have been trying to make should be clear enough by now. So what are we to make of it? It is this question to which I shall now turn by way of a brief conclusion.

4. Conclusion

There are many differences between different localities in the world: between villages, towns, cities, provinces, countries, regions, civilizations, and none of the foregoing is meant to deny them. It is, however, to say that the more fundamental differences are between modern and pre-modern social entities, not among modern ones. The multiple modernities approach is ill equipped to recognize the revolutionary shift to the modern age, tracing, as it does (at least in some versions), the presumably more profound differences between civilizations to the Axial Age some 2500 years ago whose religious, epistemic and cultural transformations are believed to transcend the modern and the pre-modern eras and hence to go deeper, to have a more significant and lasting impact on contemporary societies' identity or outlook than their lesser or greater degrees of modernization. If they did not, then the very rationale for a civilization-centered approach would collapse.

I think such an approach is both conceptually flawed and empirically dubious, and that a better alternative to accommodate existing differences in the contemporary world would be a yet-to-be-developed concept of "varieties of modernity", akin to, but naturally pitched at a higher level of abstraction than, the notion of "varieties of capitalism" emerging from the new political economy literature. Such an approach would allow us to take differences seriously, but it would have to go beyond culture and politics, the two main fields of investigation in the multiple modernities school, as well as the economy, on which the varieties of capitalism literature focuses for evident reasons. It would, in fact, have to examine the entire structure of society, all aspects of modern life and all institutional sectors differentiated out of embeddedness in the religiously sanctioned moral economy

and the stratification-based social order of the pre-modern past.²⁵ Moreover, rather than singling out a few (groups of) countries for comparative analyses, it would have to cover the whole world.

It would therefore (have to) be much more comprehensive than either of the above approaches. The across-the-board comparisons that it would encourage raise the possibility that some countries – or other social entities – are in certain respects more similar to ones belonging to other civilizations than they are to several members of their “own” and vice versa. The notion of multiple modernities suggests homogeneity within civilizations; at least more so than across civilizations. The notion of varieties of modernity raises doubts as to the soundness of this proposition, because, following the varieties of capitalism literature, it focuses on institutions, and these have already been shown to cut across civilizational boundaries in some important instances – if and to the extent that the fetters of tradition are severed. And while it cannot be known ahead of time whether this applies to all other sets of societal institutions as well, one should also not simply take the existence and persistence of difference for granted. Whatever differences are postulated must first be proven to exist, and this requires thorough analysis of the fields in question.

To be able to speak of varieties of modernity, one would have to find clusters of modern societies with coherent patterns of institutional co-variation, such that a particular type of modernity that scored high on one variable of institutional design would also have to score high on another and vice versa, resulting in what Weber has called “elective affinities” between different sets of institutions. The modernness of modern societies would first have to be determined by their conformity with a number of criteria defining or qualifying modernity. I cannot draw up the requisite checklist here, but the literature on modernity and modernization should offer suitable guidance for this purpose.

Now, given the breadth of the proposed approach, putting it to work may prove a task of such stupendous proportions that it cannot actually be accomplished, at least not by a single researcher or even a sizeable group of researchers. But that need not invalidate the idea behind the proposal. For regardless of its feasibility, the mere consideration of its conceptual and methodological prerequisites suggests a lot about the kind of knowledge needed to support the notions of either multiple modernities or varieties of modernity. Both terms make sense only if coherent patterns of the above kind can be

²⁵ Modern society, according to the differentiation theoretical school in sociology, is characterized first and foremost by the principle of functional differentiation, not by that of stratification dominating everything in hereditary status orders. This is not to say that stratification has disappeared or lost any significance in modern society. Quite the contrary. But it has had to give way to functional differentiation as the primary organizing principle (see Luhmann 1997). And given the relative autonomy of the various institutional sectors of society resulting from this shift, we cannot simply extrapolate our findings from one or two such sectors to the rest.

firmly established for particular clusters of modern societies. For only then would something very important be missed about the societies in question – indeed, about modernity as a whole – by forbearing any sub-categorization whatsoever and referring to them indiscriminately as modern societies or just calling them by names of geographical or political origin (such as East Asia or Japan).

There is of course the possibility that careful analysis would ultimately lend support to a civilization-centered approach of multiple modernities because whichever varieties of modernity such an analysis may yield turn out to be strongly correlated with cultural factors of the sort alluded to in this literature. Conversely, it is equally possible that both terms have to be discarded because beyond a number of core institutions such as those pertaining to the economy, the political order or the legal framework, modern societies simply do not form coherent clusters. In that case, our conceptualization efforts would have to target lower levels of aggregation and content themselves with labels such as “varieties of capitalism”, rather than varieties of modernity.

Needless to say, these are empirical questions and hence have to be answered empirically. For our conceptualizations of the social world are useful only to the extent that they resonate with this world, that they disclose something about it that cannot be seen or fully understood without their help. If, instead, they mislead us, then we must revise them. And even if that were the only conclusion to be drawn from our attempts at making sense of the world through newly emerging (or presently fashionable) concepts, we would still have learned something in the exercise: that there are certain claims we had better not make because the available evidence does not support them.

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