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What's Wrong With the Concept of Multiple Modernities?*

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Abstract

The concept of multiple modernities has been developed with a view to highlighting the ways in which modern societies differ from each other. Other sociological approaches, by contrast, emphasize such societies' commonalities. But does the juxtaposition of convergence and divergence in the form of a mutually exclusive, binary opposition really make sense? Might it be that there is convergence in some respect, while diversity persists in other respects; that there are dimensions of social change that exhibit common trends across regions and cultural zones, while other aspects of social life show remarkable resilience against homogenization?

The present paper argues that our observation of convergence or diversity might be less a matter of truth or falsity than an artifact of our chosen methodologies. Based on this premise, the concept of multiple modernities will be rejected as sociologically meaningless, conceptually flawed and empirically dubious. It is sociologically meaningless because its advocates fail to spell out sufficiently clearly what they mean by modern as against non-modern societies; it is conceptually flawed because it does not provide criteria for distinguishing theoretically significant from insignificant (or less significant) differences, and it is empirically dubious because it misrepresents the state of the world's development.

Keywords

Modernity, modernization, multiple modernities, comparative research, global modernity

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The concept of multiple modernities has been developed with a view to highlighting the ways in which modern societies differ from each other. Other sociological approaches, by contrast, emphasize such societies' commonalities. But does the juxtaposition of convergence and divergence in the form of a mutually exclusive, binary opposition really make sense? Might it be that there is convergence in some respect, while diversity persists in other respects; that there are dimensions of social change that exhibit common trends across regions and cultural zones, while other aspects of social life show remarkable resilience against homogenization?

The present paper argues that our observation of convergence or diversity might be less a matter of truth or falsity than an artifact of our chosen methodologies. Thus, if we engage in cross-country or -regional comparison, then we are likely to detect (more or less profound) differences between the units of comparison (which need not be states), for to unravel such differences is precisely the purpose of our analysis – if we want to know what is unique to one case, then we have to find out how and why it differs from others. If, on the other hand, we are interested in long-term, fundamental transformations of entire societal formations (e.g., from pre-modern to modern societies), then we have to compare historically and hence will see many common developments at work in otherwise quite diverse regions. In short, the relative weight placed on convergence and/or divergence may be due primarily to the research questions pursued, in which case the respective findings would not necessarily contradict each other, but simply address different reference problems.

Based on this premise, the concept of multiple modernities will be rejected as sociologically meaningless, conceptually flawed and empirically dubious. It is sociologically meaningless because its advocates fail to spell out sufficiently clearly what they mean by modern as against non-modern societies; it is conceptually flawed because it does not provide criteria for distinguishing theoretically significant from insignificant (or less significant) differences, and it is empirically dubious because it misrepresents the state of the world's development.

II

The main reason I consider the concept of multiple modernities to be sociologically meaningless is that it contributes little to our understanding of modernity – be it in the plural or in the singular. Modernity is an important concept in sociology, as it stands for the very societal formation to whose emergence the discipline itself owes its existence. Modern society is radically different from earlier modes of societal organization and the outcome of a fundamental transformation of society matched in historical significance only by the Neolithic Revolution. Theories of modernity, as we find them in the works of classical sociological thinkers such as Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel and Talcott Parsons, conceptualize modernization as an interlinked process of structural differentiation, cultural rationalization and personal individualization.

Multiple modernists reject this conceptualization based on its alleged incapacity to capture the immense social, political and cultural diversity exhibited by the modern age. This diversity, they claim, can be accounted for only if we pluralize the concept of modernity. But before we can pluralize *any* concept, we first need to know what its variations have in common, because unless we do, we will not be able to tell whether a particular case is really a variation of the type in question or rather something else. There can thus be no meaningful talk of *modernities* without a proper definition of *modernity*. Regrettably though, such a

definition is conspicuously absent from the literature on multiple modernities, as even sympathetic observers have had occasion to note (see, e.g., Allardt 2005).

We do, however, know what the notion of multiple modernities goes *against*, namely the above classical theories of modernity and, especially, the modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s, because Shmuel Eisenstadt, who coined the term, and several of his followers, have spared no effort to state their aversion to these theories (see Eisenstadt 2000a; Wittrock 2000). Taking modernization theory as a point of departure should therefore provide some hints as to the kinds of assumptions the critics must be making to lend the notion of multiple modernities theoretical credibility.

The main point of contention between modernization theory and multiple modernists is the former's claim that modernization is a homogenizing process, ultimately leading to the convergence of the societies undergoing it: "a process of social change whereby less developed societies acquire characteristics common to more developed societies", as Daniel Lerner (1968: 386) put it.

But what does modernization theory actually mean by "convergence"? To answer this question, it is important to keep in mind that modernization theory is conceptually anchored in the work of Talcott Parsons. As is well known, Parsons' theory of modernity is embedded in a more encompassing theory of action systems. Society, in Parsons' conceptualization, is a subsystem of the social system, which in turn is one of four subsystems of the general action system, the other three subsystems being the cultural system, the personality system, and the behavioral organism. Modernization theory concerns itself only with the social, cultural and personality systems. It argues that upon modernization the *personality system* becomes increasingly achievement oriented, aware of its own individuality, and empathetic; that modernization leads to rationalization, value generalization and the diffusion of secular norms in the *cultural sphere*; and that functional differentiation is the dominant trend in, as well as foremost structural characteristic of, modern *society*, the social system that is of special interest to sociological theory (Lerner 1958, 1968; Parsons 1964, 1977).

Much like other macro-sociological approaches, modernization theory places particular emphasis on (developments in) the economic and political subsystems of society, but other important subsystems such as the educational system, the scientific system, and the legal system are far from ignored. In the *economy*, the most salient change from the point of view of modernization theory is the emergence of self-sustained growth; in *politics*, it is growing participation by the citizenry; in *education*, the spread of mass schooling; in *science*, the establishment of the research university and other purely research-oriented institutions; in *law*, the increasing autonomy of professionally trained judges from external pressure and interference.

This does not yet say very much about the institutional make-up of a modern society, as conceived by modernization theory. Once again, it helps turning to Parsons for guidance, this time to his theory of evolutionary universals. Therein, Parsons associates the progression of stages of societal evolution with critical breakthroughs in social organization that give more advanced societies an edge over less advanced ones in terms of their capacity to adapt to environmental conditions. In the case of modernity, Parsons identifies four such universals that he believes were crucial both for its breakthrough and ultimate consolidation: *money and market systems* in the economy, *democracy* in the political realm, the *rule of law* and equality before the law in the legal system, and *bureaucratic organization* of public and private institutions (see Parsons 1964).

This characterization, while still somewhat vague and fairly abstract, obviously bears much resemblance to "the" Western model, to which it does indeed owe a lot. Note, however, that it does not reflect a consensual position shared by all modernization theorists. Samuel Huntington, for instance, in his book *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968), offers a less demanding conceptualization of at least *political* modernity by arguing that the most important political distinction in the modern age is not that between democracies and dictatorships but between governments that really govern the country under their (formal) jurisdiction and those that don't. A modern political order, on his conceptualization, is a system of rationalized authority wherein office holders are expected to serve the public (rather than purely their own) interest and have the capacity to execute chosen policies based on control of a well functioning state apparatus. This leaves room for political alternatives *beyond* (what is now widely viewed as) the Western model, for instance for authoritarian systems, as many of Huntington's critics have pointed out.

Parsons too allowed for more than one path to modernity and for differential institutionalizations of its (socio-cultural) "program", as can be seen from his treatment of the Soviet Union as a near equal to the United States with respect to the depth and levels of modernization achieved by the second half of the 20th century (Parsons 1977: 216ff.). He was, however, skeptical as to the long-term stability of Soviet-style political systems because of their inbuilt legitimacy deficits (Parsons 1964: 126). History seems to have proven him right on this point.

But be this as it may, Parsons, like other modernization theorists, explicitly stated his belief that there could be "[great] variations within the modern type of society" (Parsons 1977: 228) and that many such variations would probably emerge as a result of the global trend "toward completion" of this type of society, a development which he predicted would likely continue well into the 21st century (ibid.: 241).

The notion of convergence must be understood against the backdrop of this expectation. It applies first and foremost to the *basic structure* of society, the premise being that pre-modern and modern societies differ much more from each other than do the many varieties of (the one type of) modern society that emerge as a result of successful modernization, a process that Parsons viewed as far from complete. Convergence, thus understood, occurs when modernizing countries meet two main conditions. First, they must move toward establishing a set of key institutions that the theory regards as essential to modernity: a growth-producing, preferably capitalist economy; a system of "good", preferably democratic political governance; the rule of law and a legal system guaranteeing a core set of human rights; bureaucratic administrations staffed with technically competent personnel and insulated from "special" interests; a collectively run or regulated welfare system covering the entire population and securing its basic needs; mass (public) education; research and development in large science organizations, etc. Second, the countries in question must succeed in making these institutions perform in line with their stated purposes, rather than being mere "facades" (Meyer et al. 1997) of modernity.

Even today, many countries fail to meet these conditions and hence would (presently) not qualify as being (fully) modern. Yet, while difficult to meet, *neither* condition requires any modernizing country to become *exactly* like the forerunners or even a complete replica of the United States, as some of modernization theory's fiercest critics have said it does. True, Parsons *did* suggest the United States could serve as "a model for other countries in structural innovations central to modern societal development" (Parsons 1977: 215), and other modernization theorists have done likewise. In the wake of the Vietnam War and the student

revolts of the late 1960s (arguably also of the decolonization of much of the non-Western world after the Second World War), this suggestion came under fire because it was widely interpreted as a barely camouflaged rationalization of American imperialism. Is it? I don't think so. Models are just examples to learn from in the quest to catch up with leaders that are currently ahead. To propose the United States as one such model made perfect sense because at the time the proposal was made the U.S. clearly was a leader, arguably "the" world leader in modern development: in the economy, in politics, in science and technology, in (higher) education, in popular (everyday mass) culture, and possibly in other fields as well. Today, the picture is more varied because, emulating "best practices" of institutional design and policy designation in the United States and other socio-economically advanced countries, the most successful of the followers – especially Japan and the four East Asian tigers South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore – have become models themselves. And what makes them attractive *as models* is precisely that they have already achieved what others are still striving for: becoming modern and catching up with the West. But one cannot become modern and catch up with the West without establishing a basic structure of society that is similar to that of the West, because this structure is the very condition of the West's success. Modernization theory understood that, and so have the most successful agents of real world modernization in late developing countries.

III

Let us now return to the multiple modernities paradigm. Recall that the gist of the paradigm is explicitly directed against modernization theory; against the view, to quote Eisenstadt (2000a: 1), "of the convergence of industrial societies prevalent in the 1950s". This view, says Eisenstadt, must be rejected because "the actual developments in modernizing societies have refuted the homogenizing (...) assumptions of [the] Western program of modernity" by giving rise to multiple patterns of societal organization that are distinctly modern, yet clearly different from Western, or for that matter European, modernity. The contention, in short, is that modernization theory has been empirically falsified.

Eisenstadt knows that the language of *multiple* modernities can be defended only if the differences claimed to exist between modern societies are really profound. Elsewhere (2000b: 110f.), he has singled out Japan as the most important test case for modernization theory's convergence claim, given that the country was the first non-Western society to become fully modern. Since Parsons (1977: 228) shared this view, he would probably have agreed with the special weight Eisenstadt assigns Japan for any test of modernization theory's validity. Eisenstadt, in turn, while acknowledging that the reasons behind Japan's modernization drive may have been similar to those of its West European forerunners, maintains that the *pattern* of modernity that emerged from the process is not: modern Japan, he argues, exhibits peculiarities that are not just local variations of the Western model, but distinguish it *fundamentally* from this model (Eisenstadt 2000b: 111).

He then goes on to substantiate his claim at some length through empirical illustration. The first example evoked concerns the goals and effects of social movements in contemporary Japan. Generally, such movements have tended to be less radical and confrontational than their Western counterparts according to Eisenstadt, and while successful in stimulating some reform, they fell short of inducing major change in the political center. This center is also not the main steering body of society, with collectively binding decisions often taken by diverse networks of bureaucrats, politicians and members of powerful interest

groups, rather than the government or parliament. Other features said to be unique to Japan's political system are the low weight accorded fixed principles or ideologies, which are mostly overridden by pragmatic considerations, and the relative weakness of the state vis-à-vis society that constrains the scope for coercive measures and promotes a consensual style of governance (Eisenstadt 2000b, ch. 3).

Eisenstadt gives further examples of Japanese peculiarities, but none of a substantially different nature. Are they significant enough to support the claim that Japan constitutes a unique modernity, one that differs fundamentally from Western modernity? That depends on the conception of modernity employed. What little Eisenstadt and his followers have said about modernity indicates that theirs is a conception that focuses primarily on the *political system* and on questions of *collective identity*; more specifically, on the cultural or civilizational foundations of the "imagined communities" (Benedict Anderson) that inform the construction of the symbolic order of modern nation states, as well as some of the policies they pursue, regimes they establish, etc.

The political system is certainly an important subsystem of society. Yet, it is only *one* of several such systems, and to reduce the whole of society to it arguably entails an overly simplistic conception of modernity, at least when compared with that underlying the differentiation theoretical tradition in sociology, which aims to capture modern society in its *entirety*. But regardless of what one makes of this, one thing should be clear from the above reconstruction of key modernization theoretical propositions: the evidence that Eisenstadt has mobilized against them so far poses no challenge to that theory *whatsoever*. For if we judge this evidence in the light of the theory's premises – as we must if our aim is to disprove it – then the *kinds* of difference he invokes are indeed nothing other than minor variations of a structure of society that Japan, like other East Asian modernizers, *shares* with the West. The same is true of what other multiple modernists have said to stress the importance of "difference" – none of their observations point systematically *beyond* the concept (or model) of modernity guiding modernization theoretical scholarship. Nobody denies that countries (as well as provinces, cities, towns, villages, etc.) differ from each other, have their own history, etc., but that was known long before the rise of the multiple modernities paradigm. If this truism is all it has to contribute to current debates in social theory, then that contribution is rather meager.

To question the significance of some (kinds of) difference(s) for a theory of modernity is not to suggest we should be indifferent to differences *per se*. Modernization theory is certainly not. But to the extent that it *does* concern itself with differences, they tend to be ones that set modern society apart from pre-modern types of societal organization, that reflect greater or lesser degrees of modernization and development, that pertain to factors which are conducive or detrimental to modernization, etc. Differences of *this* sort, on the other hand, are largely ignored by the multiple modernities school. The reason is probably that multiple modernists, while otherwise highly attentive to differences, deny, or at least are unwilling to consider the possibility, that *such* differences might persist in the modern age. For from the perspective of this school, the whole world is equally modern now (Eisenstadt 2000a: 14). All contemporary societies are modern, only differently modern.

A differentiation theoretical perspective raises doubts as to the soundness of this view. Take the case of India. India has been a political democracy since its independence in 1947, and thus, politically speaking, doubtless modern, despite many shortcomings of its democracy. At the same time, the caste system, and hence a social structure that is *incompatible* with (full) modernity, persists in India despite its legal abolishment many years

ago. This system divides the population into closed hereditary groups ranked by ritual status. Intermarriage and interdining across caste boundaries are prohibited, and the relationships between the various groups included in the system are strictly hierarchically organized, with the upper castes controlling positions of prestige and political as well as economic power, and the lower castes relegated to positions reflecting the lesser social worth or value ascribed them. The centuries-old link between caste and occupation, and, consequently, material wealth or poverty has become less rigid since the 19th century, but socio-economically privileged groups are still predominantly upper caste and vice versa. Much worse than the situation of members of the lower castes, however, is that of the so-called untouchables or Dalits and of numerous tribal peoples, who fall *outside* the caste system and hence have *no* place within the boundaries defined by that system whatsoever. According to a recent study, this group, comprising an estimated quarter of the Indian population, suffers extreme forms of exclusion, humiliation, exploitation, and deprivation. Especially in rural India, where 70 per cent of Indians live, many Dalits are denied basic rights of citizenship, such as protection against acts of violence or the confiscation of property, voting, access to public services, selling or buying of goods at public markets, entering temples, freedom in the choice of places of residence, sometimes even marriage. They often suffer from the imposition of forced, unpaid or underpaid labor (remunerated below market rates), sexual abuse, as well as visible acts of subordination and public insult, such as wearing filthy clothes, standing with bowed head, having to walk naked in public, etc. (Shah et al. 2006; Sooryamoorthy 2008).

While the caste system is unique to India/South Asia, social cleavages and exclusions of the sort it produces are not; much of Latin America, for instance, exhibits similarly entrenched divisions between quasi-hereditary status groups (de Ferranti et al. 2004). Extreme forms of social exclusion pervading the whole structure of society are also found in parts of South East Asia (e.g., in the Philippines) and elsewhere in the (less modernized) world.

Social structures that sustain (and socio-cultural traditions that sanction) practices and hierarchies such as these are incompatible with modernity because they are based (or premised) on *categorical* inequalities that subvert the principle of functional differentiation by erecting virtually insurmountable barriers between the underprivileged and the privileged, thus blocking social mobility. They also subvert the proper functioning of many formally modern institutions, which they effectively turn into instruments for advancing elite interests – through the allocation of both public positions (that are often filled on the basis of status rather than qualification) and funds (whose distribution tends to be highly regressive).

Before the breakthrough to modernity, a social order dividing the population into strictly separated and hierarchized strata was the norm in all advanced civilizations; thereafter this order began to crumble and gradually had to give way to a new social order wherein each member of society is (to be) regarded (and increasingly also treated) as an equal. To hierarchical systems of stratification, the very notion of equality of status, and hence also that of equal citizenship, is alien and meaningless. Modern social systems, on the other hand, are certainly not egalitarian in all respects, but the inequalities they treat as permissible follow a different logic, are *gradual* rather than categorical in nature. Needless to say, this is an ideal-typical distinction, because in the real world the two types of inequality tend to overlap everywhere. Analytically, the distinction is nevertheless important because it points to a key difference between the ideational foundations of modern and pre-modern societies. What to pre-modern societies is just an immutable fact of life, constitutes a permanent embarrassment to modern societies because it contradicts their self-understanding – the semantics in which they describe themselves and judge their performance. It is precisely for this reason that the existence of deep-rooted differences of social class, between the sexes, races, ethnicities, etc.,

in short: the existence of *ascribed* (essentialized) differences, is a problem that requires ongoing remedial effort and/or justification in modern society.

Cultural traditions often serve to perpetuate hierarchies and practices of pre-modern origin. A field in which this is particularly evident is gender relations. The comparatively low value placed on the lives of girls and women in parts of South and East Asia is responsible for widespread female feticide and infanticide, resulting in a highly "skewed" sex ratio and tens of millions of "missing" women in India and China (Croll 2000). Unicef (2006) estimates that more than 130 million women and girls that are alive today have been subjected to forced genital circumcision in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa as well as in parts of Southeast Asia – and many more could be alive had the victims not died from the often grave health consequences of the procedure. Illiteracy rates for women in India, but also in many Arab countries, are two times as high as those for men, and many more girls and women than boys and men are undernourished because of cultural norms affording eating priority to males (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya 2006). Forced marriages and "defense of honour" killings of non-compliant daughters or sisters are the order of the day in much of the Muslim world, especially in its least developed parts and among the least educated segments of the population. The list goes on and on. Violence against (and subjugation of) females is of course not unique to pre-modern social settings, but while they form part of the taken-for-granted cultural heritage of much of the pre-modern world, the modern world has eroded their legitimacy and is increasingly taking steps toward abandoning and penalizing them.

For a school of thought as sensitive to "difference" as the multiple modernities school, it is remarkable how little attention it pays to differences such as *these*, which are almost totally absent from its accounts of (diversity in) the modern age. Might the reason be that they are hard to reconcile with a perspective that treats all countries and world regions as equally modern? That, at any rate, is how things appear from a differentiation theoretical perspective, according to which the most important difference between modernity and its evolutionary precursor is that between stratificatory and functional differentiation of society (Luhmann 1997). As long as stratification continues to be the *dominant* mode of societal structuring, modernity, in this view, cannot be said to have genuinely established itself.

Assuming there are differences that, rather than reflecting *intra*-modern diversity, are better understood as demarcating zones of greater or lesser *levels* of modernization attained, then one needs criteria by which to judge particular cases. Differentiation theory proposes one such criterion, the degree to which functional differentiation has been realized, and modernization theory adds others, e.g., the levels of socio-economic and socio-cultural development, the spread and performance of modern institutions, and others. And while any proposal is debatable, these two schools at least venture to make ones. The multiple modernities school, by contrast, appears unwilling to concern itself with *truly* fundamental differences, while making much of relatively minor differences in the expressive cultures of contemporary nation states; of, as John Meyer (2000: 245) put in bluntly, "things that in the modern system do not matter". That's the reason I consider the approach to be conceptually flawed.

As indicated above, modernization theory can easily accommodate differences of the sort that matter to the multiple modernists, because its concept of modernity is sufficiently abstract to permit a great deal of variation *within* the modern type of society. Modernization theory does not emphasize such variation very much, but since it does not affect modern society's *fundamental building blocks*, that which distinguishes modernity from *other* societal formations, it *rightly* ignore it, because (unless and until proven otherwise) it has no bearing

on its subject matter. Only differences that make a difference for *this* reference problem ought to be taken into account by a *theory of modernity*. Sociology is not bereft of conceptual tools permitting us to consider other (e.g., cross-country) differences within a suitable research framework, but confusing the study of modernity with the comparative analysis of developmental policy paths pursued, of institutional regime types enacted, of collective identities (temporarily) adopted, and of allegedly unchanging cultural traditions upheld, by (the elites of) particular modern countries simply conflates levels of analysis and hence does not further our understanding of either. To conceptualize varieties of the latter sort, one should better resort to various "middle range" theories, as famously proposed (but unduly privileged over "grand theory") by Robert Merton.

IV

I will now look at several post-World War II developments that I believe lend support to some of modernization theory's main propositions regarding the consequences of development (see Huntington 1971 for a summary). The starting point is the historian Eric Hobsbawm's (1994: 288; emphasis in original) observation that the period from the 1950s onwards saw "the greatest and most dramatic, rapid and universal transformation in human history (...). For 80 per cent of humanity the Middle Ages suddenly ended in the 1950s; or perhaps better still, they were *felt* to end in the 1960s".

That is a bold claim, not only in terms of its substantive content, but also in terms of its conceptual meaning. For what Hobsbawm says can be read as suggesting that modernity, far from being superseded by an entirely different type of society (as the literature on "late" or "post" modernity implies), is *only just beginning*. Do we have evidence supporting such a sweeping claim?

I think we do. Hobsbawm himself reports several major changes, "the most dramatic and far-reaching" of which he considers to be "the death of the peasantry" (ibid.: 289). This is indeed a dramatic change because it means nothing less than the *global* end of the Neolithic era during which the overwhelming majority of humankind had been securing its livelihood through (mostly subsistence) agricultural economic pursuits. And before agrarian society disappears, *modernity* cannot really unfold. It all began with the Industrial Revolution, whose impact initially remained small even in Britain though, where it affected only a relatively confined sector of the economy until far into the 19th century. As late as the 1930s and 1940s, the agricultural population still comprised up to 40 per cent in (what then were) the world's socio-economically most advanced countries, down from 60 to 90 per cent in the centuries preceding the Industrial Revolution (Crone 1989). By the 1980s, it had been reduced to levels as low as three to five per cent. Thus, in a matter of roughly two hundred years, what had determined the living conditions of humanity's overwhelming majority for millennia, had virtually vanished from this part of the planet. It took until 1990 before the peasantry became a *global* minority (Firebaugh 2003). Today, it is estimated to comprise roughly 43 per cent of the world's workforce (ILO 2006).

A change that typically accompanies the decline of the peasantry is the rise of the city. Modern life, it is widely agreed, is urban life. But until recently, most of the world's population lived in rural areas. That is changing now. Since 2007, half the world's population has been urban for the first time. The trend is expected to continue with the rapid socio-economic transformation of newly industrializing countries, especially of China, where by

2020 roughly 60 per cent of the population is expected to live in cities. Two hundred years earlier, just 2.5 percent of the world's population lived in cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants (Kumar 1999). By 1900, that figure had risen to 13 per cent (*Economist*, 3 May 2007) – a fivefold increase in just eighty years, but in terms of its effects on humanity at large still a far cry from the latest leap. And whatever else may be said about this change, life in the city undoubtedly differs radically from that in the countryside.

A further important change concerns levels of education and literacy. Between the late 18th and 19th centuries, several northwest European countries and North America began to institute compulsory education in state-run or state-controlled schools. By 1870, 30 countries reported enrolment figures of over 10 per cent for the 5-14 year age group (Meyer et al. 1992). Looking at some of the effects, Britain had reduced the illiteracy level of its population to three per cent as early as 1900 (Landes 1998); other leading countries, while mostly lagging behind, were quickly catching up. Elsewhere, however, mass education took off only after 1945, but as soon as 1985, it was compulsory in 80 per cent of the world's countries. As a result, between 1970 and 1990, global literacy levels rose from 48 to 75 per cent; today that figure is 82 per cent (UNDP 2006). In other words, it was only during the past quarter century that educational modernity broke through globally.

One of the effects of industrialization has been historically unprecedented levels of wealth. Income per capita for the world as a whole increased eightfold between 1820 and 1990. However, half of this increase occurred during the last 40 of these altogether 170 years (Firebaugh 2003). Initially, the growing wealth was very unevenly spread. "Popular affluence" did not become general even in much of Western Europe until the 1960s, with North America just a few decades ahead. Given that the era of "modern economic growth" (Kuznets 1973), whose onset Angus Maddison (1995) dates back to roughly 1820, reached the rest of the world other than Japan only after 1950, this wealth was initially also highly concentrated in the West. Thereafter, it began to spread to other parts of the globe. In the so-called golden age from 1950 to 1973, per capita incomes rose significantly in all world regions, thereafter they continued to rise only in the West and in Asia, primarily East Asia. However, since 1973 Asia grew more than double the rate of the West. One result is a massive poverty reduction both in the region itself and (due to its population share) globally; a trend that has continued since 1990 and is expected to do so in the decades ahead (Economist Intelligence Unit 2006).

Using the one dollar per day consumption standard of the World Bank, poverty was the "norm" for humankind for millennia. Globally speaking, three quarters of our ancestors fell below that poverty line two centuries ago, and with an estimated per capita income of \$ 651 annually, the average world "citizen" was in fact close to it in 1820 (Firebaugh 2003: 13). 130 years later, the share of the (thus defined) poor had been reduced to one half of the world's people, today it is down to one sixth (UNDP 2006) – even though rapid population growth means the absolute number of poor people is now probably higher than ever before. Mirroring the reduction of poverty since 1820, a middle income group slowly emerged. Presently, with annual incomes of over \$ 7,000 of purchasing power parity, roughly one fourth of the world's population has reached levels of prosperity that qualify it for membership in the so-called "consumer class" (Worldwatch Institute 2004); a class that comprised a negligible minority just half a century earlier. In the view of economists, this development reflects "the greatest advance in the condition of the world's population ever achieved in such a brief span of time" (Easterlin 2000: 7).

Industrialization, urbanization, mass education and rising incomes virtually everywhere result in higher life expectancy and declining fertility. As for the latter trend, fertility levels have been falling globally during the past four to five decades, but most dramatically in socio-economically advanced regions, where they are now universally below the replacement level. For women, in particular, this development "represents nothing less than a revolutionary enlargement of freedom" (Titmuss 1966: 91), as it frees them from the wheel of childbearing and childrearing that had dominated their lives for thousands of years. The reduction in Asian fertility levels alone, which accounts for four fifths of the global fertility decline, has been labeled a "revolutionary" change (Caldwell 1993), "one of the most significant events of modern times" (McNicoll 1991: 1).

A "revolution in the status of women" (Nazir 2005) has also occurred in other respects during the past couple of decades, namely through their formal recognition as persons and citizens, their constantly rising levels of education, labor market participation, etc. This development set in roughly a century ago in Europe and North America, but even there it gained momentum only after World War II, arguably even as late as the 1960s, following the rise of a powerful feminist movement. Since then, it has become a global trend (Berkovitch 1999), leaving no world region unaffected, although, as indicated in section III, the degrees of penetration obviously differ enormously (for an overview of the present situation, see Unicef 2006).

The list of changes does not end here; it could be extended by several important developments in the fields of technology (e.g., the rapid expansion of high-speed mass transportation systems and of mass communication systems that have extended the geographic mobility and world awareness of billions of people enormously within a few decades), in the global economy (i.e., the reversal of a situation in which only a minority of the world's population lived under capitalist institutions to the present situation, where this is true of the large majority, in just two decades), in the political sphere (since 1992, for the first time more than half of all states have been governed democratically), in the areas of science and medicine, etc.

Considered by themselves, each of these developments marks a dramatic change in the domain(s) of life and sphere(s) of society they affect. Taken together, they mean little less than a *social revolution*, resulting in a *fundamental* transformation of the entire society, which, once it has undergone this transformation, bears little resemblance to anything known, or at least experienced on a mass basis, before. They also suggest that modernity has finally broken through *globally*. For the first time since its early manifestations in Renaissance Europe, it has begun to touch and shape the lives of large parts, if not the majority, of the world's population.

The millennium thus ushers in global modernity; a *watershed* in the history of humanity, because, unlike much other change, the change that *this* transition, the transition to *genuinely* modern living conditions and institutions, involves is "comparable in magnitude only to the transformation of nomadic peoples into settled agriculturalists some 10,000 years earlier", as Reinhard Bendix (1977: 362) aptly states. However, even at the beginning of the 21st century, this transition, despite affecting all world regions, has not been equally far-reaching everywhere, for, as I have tried to show in section III, in most parts of the world deep-rooted remnants of the old order uneasily co-exist with modern institutions and life forms, keeping modernity in check, as it were.

"Full modernity" has so far probably arrived only in two world regions, namely the (recently much expanded) West and East Asia (Tu 2000), the latter being represented by Japan and the four "tigers" South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as (growing) parts of their neighborhood. Given the world's uneven levels of socio-economic, cultural, institutional and social structural development, these two regions should therefore prove the best testing grounds for claims concerning the consequences of modernization, including those pertaining to the problem of "convergence" and/or "diversity" – a view not dissimilar to Eisenstadt's point about Japan's importance for this test, but extending its basis beyond Japan's borders. I close this section with some empirical observations comparing East Asian and Western modernity.

One feature that East Asian and Western modernity share, and that arguably differentiates them more from *other* world regions than from *each* other, is the "systemic" quality of the modernization processes they underwent and continue to undergo, meaning that "changes in one factor are related to and affect changes in other factors" (Huntington 1971: 288). Modernization in these two regions, rather than being confined to particular sectors of society and/or certain segments of the population, has been and continues to be an *all-inclusive* phenomenon, transforming every aspect of societal organization and the lives of all members of society in a very short time span. A second, and related, aspect that the respective modernization processes share is the direction of change. With minor variations, comparable political, administrative, legal, economic, scientific, educational, welfare etc. systems are in place that pursue largely similar goals, run similar institutional programs, and are more or less equally effective. All countries in question are rich, some a little more than others. They all face similar problems and they all respond to them in roughly similar fashion. All observe each other in the quest for models/"best practices" to be emulated, or pitfalls to be avoided, at home. Major policy reforms pioneered and successfully implemented by one country (or other administrative unit) are sooner or later copied, with some local variation and adaptation, by the others, and the laggards of the past may well be the leaders of the present or the future. The populations share many characteristics: levels of education, employment structures, hopes and aspirations, life styles, living arrangements, fertility levels, consumption patterns, and, as global surveys show, increasingly even value systems (with "self-expression" values becoming more prevalent over time and "traditional" values slowly subsiding, though nowhere fully disappearing; see Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Of course, differences are also to be found between and within the two regions. In terms of their impact on the performance of public institutions and private organizations, these differences are relatively insignificant though, and they pale, once again, in comparison to the differences that distinguish the *group as a whole* from the rest of the world that has not yet reached comparable levels of modernization/degrees of modernity. There are certainly differences in the political systems, and in terms of the political, legal and social conditions facing (different groups of) citizens, these differences can matter a great deal. At the same time, the respective polities all excel in "good governance", serving the people better than their (often highly corrupt, if not outright "predatory") equivalents elsewhere in the world. Different varieties of capitalism may be practiced in (parts of) North America, Europe and East Asia, and the respective business cultures also vary somewhat, but together, the economies of "full modernity" top any list of global competitiveness, productivity, efficiency, innovativeness, leaving other regions far behind. The welfare systems established by the group's "members" differ markedly, but in contrast to much of the rest of the world, where such systems barely exist, they all have functioning mechanisms for protecting the most vulnerable and for aiding the poor in place (Schmidt 2008). They also dominate the world's research and development, and while the West was much ahead until recently, East Asia has

rapidly caught up and now is the only region outside the West that has a sizeable number of world-class universities/research institutes. Not surprisingly, the science produced there addresses the same global community, uses the same methodologies and follows the same standards of excellence. Taken together, the two regions also boast the best educational and medical systems in the world, and while the organization of both systems varies slightly from country to country, they share key premises, technologies and characteristics, not the least of which is a common knowledge base. And so on, and so forth.

We also find some differences in the ordinary lives led by the various populations: in the rites they perform, in the deities (if any) they worship, in the (religious and secular) festivals they celebrate, in the diets they prefer, etc. Yet, the lived experience of a typical ethnic Chinese physician/business woman/office clerk/industrial worker in Singapore probably resembles that of her Anglo-Saxon (or French or Swedish, etc.) counterpart living anywhere in the world more than that of a typical Chinese peasant living in one of China's poorest western provinces or that of her own ancestors who migrated to Singapore three generations earlier. If the multiple modernists were right, then common cultural roots should separate the ethnic Chinese *more* from their Western counterparts than from each other; if modernization theory were correct, then we would expect greater homogeneity within socio-economically similar groups than among people of similar ethnic and civilizational origin, but subject to vastly different levels of development. The available evidence, of which I have discussed only a small fraction in this section, clearly favors the second proposition.

V

The conclusion of the foregoing must therefore be that, *empirically* speaking, the reasons for retaining a singular concept of modernity seem weightier than those offered for discarding it. From a *social theoretic* viewpoint, the concept of multiple modernities never made sense anyway, because it rests on a too simplistic, as well as underspecified, theory of modernity, making much of relatively small differences in the political systems and expressive cultures of some of the world's nation states, while downplaying, if not altogether ignoring, social structural, institutional and other (including cultural) differences that cut far deeper and that arguably divide the world into a growing modern part and a "rest" that has not yet fully accomplished modernity.

Where modernity has progressed furthest, it takes on a remarkably similar shape in practically all institutional sectors of society – in the political system, in the economy, in the legal system, in the educational system, in the scientific system, in the medical system, etc. – as well as in the living conditions and life styles of the people. Thus, if we avoid equating convergence with identity, then modernization theory got it right.

Proponents of a singular concept of modernity need not deny (or belittle) cross-country/regional variations. Nor does such a concept preclude the possibility that some variations may be quite profound – or at least *appear* so when comparing modern countries/regions *synchronically*, rather than studying the evolution of societal formations in a *diachronic* fashion, as befits a theory of society/modernity. In other words, the emphasis placed on differences/similarities is not simply a matter of facts, but should (also) vary with the reference problems pursued and with the research perspectives adopted. As trivial as this may seem to be, it is overlooked in much of the pertinent social science literature.

Assuming a careful study of the institutional and everyday realities in different modern countries yielded sufficient diversity to warrant conceptual attention, then a better alternative to the fuzzy notion of multiple modernities might be a yet-to-be-developed concept of "varieties of modernity" (Schmidt 2006) that, while permitting us to retain a unitary concept of modernity, would provide ample scope for capturing intra-modern differences. But even the proposal of such a concept would require a strong justification; just a few differences here and there would not be good enough. What one would have to find to justify it are coherent patterns of institutional co-variation that systematically separate not only the economies or politics or educational systems etc. of one group of countries from those of others, but the *whole institutional make-up of society across the board* and according to a common, overarching logic that visibly shapes all (important) subsystems. For instance, if it was claimed that a peculiarly "Confucian" or "East Asian" or "Korean" variety of modernity exists that differs substantially from, say, "Protestant" or "Catholic" or "West European" or "North American" or "Canadian" or "Danish" or whichever modernity, then what would be needed to support this claim is evidence showing that the respective signifier *decisively* marks the outlook of all societal subsystems in the variety in question, such that something very important would be missed if this was ignored in conceptualizations of *modernity* and instead discussed within the framework of other concepts, pitched at lower levels of abstraction. As long as we cannot demonstrate the existence of such cross-system homologies, we had better content ourselves with the tools we already have for analyzing *area-* and *policy-specific* variations (such as American-style vs. Japanese-style industrial relations; French vs. Taiwanese education policies; etc.) or *sector-specific* variations (e.g., types of capitalism, types of governance, types of welfare provision, etc.) prevailing in certain countries or regions. For when we talk about modernity, be it in the singular or in the plural, then we have to focus on society in its *entirety*, not just in this or that dimension.

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