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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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