

Recognizing Multiple Modernities: A Prelude to Understanding Globalization

The tradition-modernity dichotomy was almost universally endorsed in the 1960s and modernization is still viewed as a homogenizing process. The underlying assumption behind this proposition is that there are a wide variety of traditional societies and the series of 'izations' -- industrialization, Urbanization, bureaucratization -- will eventually bring about one society, a global or world society. But latterly the talk about multiple modernities rent the air of social science.

The immediate inspiration for this new conceptualization seems to be three. First, the empirical experiences of the now dismantled Second World which too was technologically modern like the First World, but was radically different from the latter, socially and politically. Second, the emergence of East Asia, as an economic power, particularly Japan and the Asian Tigers, which too is 'modern', but not quite similar in their modernity as compared to that of the First World. Finally, the 'dependent modernity' of Latin American society which shared the culture, particularly religion and language of the First World, but quite different in its economic base -- not a coloniser but an ex-colony. These different permutations and combinations in specific societies, and several more could be added to the list as African modernity or south-Asian modernity, should have understandably gave birth to the current notion of multiple modernities. But an examination of the classical conceptual baggage of sociology unfolds, at least four axes around which the notion of modernity was articulated. These are structural differentiation (Emile Durkheim), rationalization (Max Weber), the history-making project (Karl Marx) and modern life (Georg Simmel).

The notion of structural differentiation gave birth to the dynamic of societal transformation variously conceptualized as a movement from simple to complex, tradition to modernity, community to society, sacred to secular, status to contract, folk/rural to urban, to list a few. The mechanisms involved in this transformation are believed to be (a) occupational differentiation and the consequent elaboration of division of labour, (b) diversification and the attendant heterogeneity and (c) plurality and the gradual evolving of a complex social network and interdependence in the place of the traditional cradle-to-grave arrangement. In this process each society becomes different from the other, less and less self-sufficient, more and more specialized and hence increased complementarity.

On the other hand, a specific type of social differentiation has laid the foundation for increasing individuation of subjects, the route being organic solidarity brought about through industrialization. The most compelling element behind this process, it has been argued, is modern technology. So much so, modernization is conceived as a process in which the progressive displacement of animate energy with inanimate energy occurs. But differentiation to occur the intervention through technology is not always a pre-requisite. Thus differentiation in the West occurred both before the advent of modern technology (e.g., the bifurcation

between state and church) and after it (e.g., the differentiation between civil society and market). In contrast, in one-party systems, in spite of technological sophistication structural differentiation did not occur. Further, in spite of considerable progress in industrialization and elaboration of occupational division of labour both market and civil society remained under the control of the state.

That is, while modern technology, elaborate division of labour and occupational differentiation are common to capitalist and socialist societies, there are basic differences between them. Both are 'modern' but their modernities differ. Some however, argued that socialist societies are not modern as their political (state) and economic (market) structures are undifferentiated. Others suggested that technological modernity shared by both capitalist and socialist societies created a convergence between them. This means one can and perhaps one should distinguish between the compartmental modernity of socialist systems and the full-fledged modernity of capitalist systems. Which is to say, structural differentiation is not the only not even the most critical marker of modernity. This renders structural differentiation as a source of modernity incomplete and inefficient as it can account for only certain dimensions of modernity. This brings us to rationalization as a source of modernity.

Rationalization is a process bound up with disenchantment of the world, its demystification. Accordingly, unforeseeable forces no longer interfere in social affairs, it is argued. The 'good' is defined less and less in relation to God, but more and in relation to functioning society. In this rendition of modernity, reason and reality are isomorphic. Understandably, the rationalization process results in increasing fit between means and ends, it is believed. Science and technology, rather than religion or magic becomes crucial. In this vein of thinking, capitalism is the embodiment of rationality and modern capitalism has its essence in rationality.

The essential features of rationality of modern capitalism are the calculability furthered by market place, the purely instrumental orientation of action, a highly technical system of book-keeping and the bureaucratic organization of firms. Traditional affective constraints wane or vanish as a social world wherein social actors are increasingly, if not exclusively, guided by their instrumental interests emerge. The project of rationality assumes that the individual can evolve, guided by his interests, in an intelligible world. Perfection through reason is the guiding principle. Finally, rationalization of the world pre-supposes the depersonalization of social relations.

However, the fact that functioning 'modern' societies are visited by irrationality, superstition and sentiments is widely acknowledged and recorded which points to the impossibility of a completely rational and hence modern society of this version. The hatred which thrives across religious, linguistic and racial groups and the animosity which prevails across even secular ideological communities in the modern world are not founded in rationality. In fact, human beings are more rationalizers rather than rational. This points to the limits of modernity which can be unleashed through the axis of rationality.

It is important to note in passing here the two features shared by the two sources of modernity -- structural differentiation and rationalization. First, both seem to be accounting

more for the modernity of capitalist societies and neglect the modernity of socialist societies. Second, both have the displacement syndrome and western epistemological dualism at their core. That is, reality is conceptualized as a duality -- traditional/ modern, rational/irrational -- and it is presumed that in the onward march of social transformation one will displace the other. But available empirical evidence suggests that this is not happening. True, there are partial displacements but there are also partial retentions and occasional accretions. And what is more, what are displaced are not always irrational and those which are retained and added are not always rational. What we have left is a collage of the old and the new, rational and irrational.

Both structural differentiation and rationalization assumes the displacement of traditional collectivism with modern individualism. True, modernity cannot be separated from the will of individuals to become unfettered actors in society. In fact, the birth of individual itself is an indication of modernity. In pre-modern societies, traditional collectivism prevailed. The conscious individual is a creator of history, who interrogates all established social relationships. To do this, the individual should be incessantly in the quest for knowledge, not only to meet intellectual curiosity but also to solve practical problems. This voluntarism cannot remain at the individual level, it should generate a new, modern collectivism manifesting in the working class movement eventuating in revolution giving birth to a New Society. This is the Marxian project of making history.

The two versions of modernity fathered by structural differentiation and rationalization recognized traditional collectivism but did not yield much space for modern collectivism. In contrast, the version of modernity championed by the history making project juxtaposed the two antagonistic classes and assumed that social transformation is a function of confrontation between these classes. But this characterization was not entirely correct even in the case of European societies. There were and are several non-class antagonistic social categories -- national, racial, gender, generational and regional. The existence of these social categories was not adequately recognized in the version of modernity which addressed the project of making history.

However, the salience of working class movements articulating in a myriad form from -- professional and occupational associations, trade unions and a variety of interest groups -- cannot be denied. But their career climaxed in the West in the 1950s and a set of post-class movements -- feminist, peace, youth, environmental/ ecological, national/ethnic -- all of which transcend the class dichotomy and boundaries emerged. These are the New Social Movements. This development was not anticipated by Marx or Marxians but this too has to be reckoned as a project of making history. The New History does not advocate class antagonism but class harmony and the project has the harmony of races, sexes, and generations as well as the harmony between humans and nature as its ultimate goal.

The old version of history-making project has been abandoned because of its political authoritarianism. Dictatorship of the proletariat manifested as one-party regimes crystallized as party-states which were totalitarian and all-encompassing. The socialist state became not only the final arbiter but the only adjudicator between contending interests. In this process, it

not only prevented the birth of market but relegated the civil society too to the background. That is, the project of making history, although started as a modernist venture has ended up as an anti-democratic and hence anti-modern project.

I have noted above that neither structural differentiation nor rationalization adequately recognized modern collectivism. The Marxian project of making history did provide the space for modern collectivism but it recognized only class collectivism and dismissed the collectivism of other varieties as based on false consciousness. In this project of making history in Socialist states the history of non-class categories was cognized as irrelevant and inappropriate. Indeed an effort was made to banish these inconvenient histories from collective memory and an effort was made to re-invent history in favour of dominant nationalities so as to facilitate their hegemonization. Russification in Soviet Union, Hanisation in China, Serbianization in Yugoslavia afford examples of this. This process has also occurred in capitalist societies, although through a different route, as exemplified by Frenchification in France, Englishisation in United Kingdom and Spanishisation in Spain etc. But relegation of collective memory and identity to the background of a wide variety of categories -- age-groups and gender -- in homogeneous societies and also of racial, national and religious identities in multi-racial and multi-cultural societies has prompted these categories to invent their specific histories and insist on their specific identities.

In the absence of a common history, there cannot be a collective conscience or a common vanguard. This is the context of identity politics as against class politics; if in the latter the society is polarized into two classes, in the former a wide variety of identities crystallize. If in class politics and its history-making project protest was based on the political economy of exploitation, in the case of identity politics protest focus on the repression of identity too in addition to exploitation. If both structural differentiation and rationalization associated with capitalist modernity produced individual alienation, loss of non-class collective freedom and absence of identity-recognition resulted in alienation of collectivities in socialist societies. The break-up of Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia points to the search for a non-class, national identity on the part of marginalized nationalities.

The fourth modernity that I want to talk about relates to modern life-style. Modernity implies changes in perceptions of space and time and in the speed of exchange. Modernity involves rapid transactions, life in cities and accelerated pace of events. Modern life in cities is unsettled and it is constantly in flux. Due to these reasons barter is not possible and money assumes social importance in three contexts. First, as the symbol of movement and circulation. Second, as the universal equivalent of goods and services transacted. Third, as a universal levelling force. Money empties everything of its particularity, its specific value. Importance is decided in terms of how much money value you command -- the neighbourhood you stay, the car you own, the amount of money your acting or painting can get, the number of copies your book sells and hence the royalty you pocket. Nothing has intrinsic value, everything has only money value.

The modern life-style is made possible through the shrinkage of space and time facilitated through the revolution in transport and communication. From this, the distance to globality

itself is short because globalization ultimately is brought about through a shrinkage in space and time and the easiness of exchange. This is further facilitated through money taking new forms -- for example, the credit card, wherein even the disadvantages of a multiplicity of currencies are done away with.

All the four classical thinkers recognized the discontents of modernity. Durkheim recognized increasing individuation, Weber warned about depersonalization, Marx alerted about alienation and Simmel noted the loss of intrinsic worth. Through these processes the community is sentenced to death by modernity, individualism is celebrated and a homogeneity based on similarity in behaviour and attitudes emerge which has no organic base, but is merely aggregative. That is social actors are apparently similar viewed in terms of their life style but actually they are different in terms of their deeper values. This explains why individuals and groups who share the same life styles enter into persisting conflicts based on race, religion or language. Recall the conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka or Kashmir.

Part of the problem here arises from the monistic conceptualization of modernity as a movement from multiple traditions to singular modernity. As I have noted earlier Western epistemological dualism and displacement syndrome is at the core of this mode of conceptualization. It is an either-or paradigm which juxtaposes mind and matter, emperor and pope, church and state, sacred and secular. The fact is that this mode of conceptualization cannot grapple with the evolving empirical reality even of the West. Co-existence of religious, racial and linguistic plurality along with diverse secular ideologies has become an empirical fact which sits uneasily with the tradition versus modernity-paradigm. Further, the ongoing process of transformation also indicates the existence of multiple modernities. It seems to be correct to think of different versions of democracy, capitalism, socialism, secularism and technologies. That is, plurality of modernity is a fact.

In Europe modernity's source was endogenous -- the internal dynamic of society -- surfacing through a series of revolutions -- the conflicts between aristocracy and clergy, the revolt of economic categories against clergy and aristocracy, and the proletarian revolution which tragetted the bourgeoisie. In South Asia, to begin with the source of modernity was the colonial revolution inspired by the presence of an external agent. But the modernizing impact of this revolution was segmental; the elites exposed to higher education and secular ideology was the agency through which the revolution impacted. Gradually the consequences started seeping down. The vertical transmission of the consequences of modernity started gradually enveloping the lower sections of society in South Asia. The promise of equality and justice in a modern polity which still hosted a traditional society gave birth to a new trajectory of modernization.

It was industrial urbanization, propped up by modern technology, which heralded the beginning of modernity in the West. Four mobilities -- spatial, social, occupational and ideological -- followed, which shuffled around individuals and groups. While the pace of change in the material and technological realms were substantial, the change in non-material and ideological realms were less. This led to the formulation of cultural lag hypothesis. What is pertinent for the present discussion is that this trajectory affected the content of modernity

in Europe, which in turn gain meaning to the convergence thesis; convergence between capitalist and socialist systems.

In South Asia, the ideological dimension was sought to be changed first. The introduction of the values of equality, justice and freedom was far more unsettling in a hierarchical and traditional society than special mobility or technological change. In turn this produced a modernity of a different hue which assigned primacy to values rather than to technology. That is, the sources, patterns and consequences of modernity differed between say West Europe and South Asia. Therefore, not only that the simplistic unilinear movement from tradition to modernity is untenable but the movement seems to be from multiple traditions to multiple modernities.

If this argument is correct the notions of unilinear globalization and singular globality too are untenable. Multiple modernity implies multiple globality because the point of departure inevitably influences the point of destination even when the process of displacement is the same. But as I have indicated earlier (a) displacement is never total and invariably partial, (b) the process of displacement differs across societies and (c) accretion of alien elements into societies is necessarily selective. For these reasons, the current notion of a monolithic globality should be re-examined with great rigour and care.

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