

BEYOND EVOLUTION AND HISTORICISM: CULTURAL FORMS OF MODERNITY

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Summary

The confluence of theoretical approaches over the past five decades has demonstrated the multi-dimensional and complex nature of modern society and systems. History, culture, society and language are interrelated in such complex ways that modernization, evolution, structuralism and globalism cannot sufficiently capture the manifold processes at work. Processes across both time and space need to be grasped in order to comprehend the divergent formations that comprise modernity, that is, the plural and not singular phenomenon we call ‘modernity’.

Drawing upon historical sociology, social theory, history, philosophy and psychology this many-sided approach is peculiarly attuned to the dynamic and temporal dimensions of socio-cultural phenomena and philosophic questions. Critique and interpretation thus extend analysis beyond mere descriptivism and compel us toward a self-reflective knowledge that recognizes differentiated worlds.

1. Introduction

The difficult question of what sort of world we belong to and what kind of existence we lead is usually taken up with discussions concerning ‘modernity’ – a concept that has undergone much interrogation and change. Scholars working in various disciplines for some time have investigated societies and cultural forms or civilizations which in fact preceded the development of western capitalism and science. What has consequently emerged since the revision of Eurocentric accounts of world history is a theoretical perspective that encompasses divergent civilizational forms and promulgates, to varying degrees, the notion of ‘multiple modernities’. Comparative and historical analyses of

diverse metaphysical traditions, religious world-views, scientific traditions and symbolic forms demonstrate the necessity to conceive of both society and individual phenomena a) within time and space and b) outside the limits of evolutionary or deterministic theories of phenomena. In the following discussion, each of the theorists we examine articulate their respective arguments concerning sociocultural phenomena and modern forms of power according to these dual precepts. Departing from their predecessors yet still strongly influenced by twentieth century classical theory (e.g. Max Weber, Sigmund Freud), they seek to give a genealogical analysis of social formations and cultural constellations. Historically minded and attuned to an axiology of social forms these theorists maintain the intellectual-normative principle that differentiation emerges out of a) temporal existence and b) cultural expressions of the divine and mundane worlds. As modernization can no longer be said to be the *problematic*, the ongoing development of new forms of symbolic, social, material and religious life and competing forms of power suggest a complexity which neither globalism nor systems-network theory nor postcolonial approaches can properly apprehend. In sharp contrast to outmoded unilinear views of history, postmodern discourses of fragmentation and Darwinian notions of ‘progress’, the clarion call has been sounded for a more heterogeneous and diachronic conceptual analytic. As we shall see each of our multidisciplinary thinkers offer up a decidedly non-static, *process* view of social complexity and reality which acknowledges the essential contingency and ‘reversibility’ of human effort and purpose i.e. a non-teleological account. The systematic approach of Alfred Whitehead, as will become evident, can be found in the work of the American historian of ideas, social theorist of religion and science, and psychoanalytic interpreter – Benjamin Nelson.

2. Paradigm-shifts and Renovations in Social-Cultural Determination

The emergence of a scholarly field that rejected the ahistorical and functionalistic temper of paradigms predominant in the years before and after World War Two assumed the form of multidisciplinary inquiries into historically formed and culturally diverse complexes of sociation. As ‘North’ theories inexorably reigned – modernization, behaviourism, evolutionary science, positivist social science and liberalism – a number of alternative yet essentially critical theoretical standpoints emerged to contest the methodological naiveté and moral bankruptcy of dominant ideological premises. Against the backdrop of Cold-War intellectual conservatism, social and economic historians, neo-Marxists, and liberal and radical theoreticians or philosophers questioned the implicit deterministic and Eurocentric notions which culminated in the impoverished thesis of the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama). After the collapse of western empires, a certain moral myopia attended post-war deterministic arguments about the ‘South’ (developing nations) and East (former communist bloc) ineluctably being drawn into the mainstream of western capitalism and democracy. Implicitly or otherwise, the measure of advancement or ‘civilization’ still stemmed from Europe’s former empire-building civilizational arena. Only after the cataclysmic results of World War One, cold war state violence and neo-colonialism since the Suez Canal crisis did the intellectual class begin to doubt the theoretic assumptions underlying modern liberal frameworks of knowledge – hence the (mistaken) adage of *post-modernity*. Following the Scottish Enlightenment figure Adam Smith, liberal and radical observers alike agreed (in different ways) on the central tenet of Karl Marx’s

thesis: European capitalism and its attendant materialist values uniquely possessed the world-historical potential to transform the face of the earth i.e. real universalism.

Until the abovementioned paradigm-shift occurred, most observers latently subscribed to a western foundationalism that acted as the pillar stone of modern secular life, thus enabling the comparing and measuring of non-Western societies against European and American ‘open society’ forms. From the time of the French *Annales* school to dependency theory and world-systems theory (1970s), it gradually became clear how important this *Weltanschauung* pervaded western conceptions of ‘the social’, history and normative structures. Whilst the main sources of intellectual inquiry for historical comparative analysis still lay with the work, for instance, of the German sociologist and professor of law Max Weber, a certain de-colonization of the western outlook had yet to be fully realized. A second form of decentration now lay with the Westphalian sovereign state, that object which sociology had largely ignored in its explication of systematic theories: decolonization of the South, nuclearization of war, the capitalist world-system (Wallerstein) and different resistance/social movements against bourgeois society. Each of these developments militated against the seemingly self-enclosed, bounded state of a single nation bequeathed to us by the nineteenth century. Hence post-war historical sociology paradoxically took off when the clamour to ‘bring the state back in’ to the analysis ran counter to its perceived decline in autonomous power in the actual world. As citizenship and rights (Turner) began to feature in sociological analysis and debates, other trends toward globalization were in fact thwarting its monopoly status.

Following a revolt against the west both within and without western societies in the 1960’s–1970’s, the study of different social formations and cultural complexes gained momentum as previously eclipsed (silenced) voices began to be heard. As the categories of race, class, gender, language and religion increasingly entered into philosophical and social-theoretical analyses, other civilizational forms emerged that gave credence to the idea of a certain globalization process unfolding in time (Robertson). Most disciplines within the social sciences and humanities began to reflect this wider perspective onto the world, evincing a kind of decentration of the standard European interpretation, including the idea of a single global modernity. This was in evidence within other variants such as political sociology and international political theory where relations with those beyond our moral boundary – the excluded, the stranger, the outsider – further highlighted the problematical presuppositions of knowledge under-girding ‘modern progress’. For example, early exponents of historical sociology showed how different state structures produced unlike modern forms of rule and political systems of domination (Barrington Moore; Charles Tilly). Against the earlier drive within political economy to demonstrate the weakness and fluidity of state boundaries within the capitalist world-system, a new generation of social theorists reclaimed the nation-state to understand its thorough going transformation of ‘the social’ in the face of heightened violence by the ‘welfare-warfare state’ (Skocpol, Mann, Giddens). More importantly, what had taken hold in various strands of conceptual research was the necessity to conceive of phenomena within a much broader historical and long-term dimension – dimensions in which processes of formation and alteration could be identified. The time had arrived to acknowledge what in fact was already known amongst specialists working within specific areas (e.g. sinologists), periods (French enlightenment) and

languages: that heterogeneity is stronger than homogeneity. Therefore, even before the rise of globalism as a distinctive discourse, the trend toward heterogeneity was already gaining momentum and intellectual prowess amongst scholars. By this time (circa 1972) French philosophical influences had also made inroads into the self-consciousness of scholars' work as the parlance of different domains of inquiry began to evince a recognition – by means of an new *ethos* – of the importance of 'the other', the non-identical, for the making and unmaking of one's self-concept, one's self-understanding. Hegel had already shown this to be the case even though he had consigned the Orient to backwardness.

It can therefore be argued in the last quarter of the twentieth century an acute self-consciousness of the relative autonomy of culture had philosophically and pragmatically inscribed itself onto contemporary modes of explanation. A historical social theorist would link this to the decline of western hegemony, beginning with the decolonization process itself if not already with the disastrous Great War of 1914. Beyond this macroscopic explanation, we must also look to immanent forces – to 'inner' logics of dispersion, rupture and generative power – as scholars in various disciplines grappled with claims of contention, struggle and contestation over power by diverse groups. That is to say, how the science of interpretation and empiricist problem-solving is itself a part of the very *historie* under which subjectivization operates to form civilized subjects of specific cultural norms and meaning. The levels in which this particular *historie* unfolds – to permeate what Adorno called 'inner nature' – proceeded from the economic, to the social, the scientific, and then to the political and inexorably to the 'cultural' sphere of traditions of meaning and world-religious interpretations. While the last and the first of these were in fact intertwined from the beginning of the 'quarrel with the ancients' (*querelle des anciens*) it was only when symbolic ontologies gained full expression that they eventually became disentangled from the veil of scientific objective truth i.e. positivism. Symbolic forms, codes and practices were thus made integral to the process of observing and analyzing modernity, which meant that the process of inquiring into and evaluating comparative differences and similarities also had to take into account one's specific cultural or normative standpoint.

We can briefly note two basic modalities which appeared to respond to the need for scholars to adopt a more reflexive stance towards other forms of 'modern' existence. Firstly, area and sub-disciplinary specialists received a welcomed affirmation of their highly specialized studies on a particular language, region or nationality. Scholars with language competence vis-à-vis a specific region or nation were at an advantage as result of this greater sensitivity to cultural specificity. Secondly, postcolonial studies in conjunction with various 'deconstructive' manoeuvres within French philosophy further questioned the priority of a 'white mythology' which had proliferated under the aegis of a grand narrative of modern consciousness cutting through swaths of un-enlightened culture. In contradistinction to each of these intellectual trends scholars continuing work within the multidisciplinary field of historically oriented social-theoretical analysis and civilization theory take a different path to the incorporation of 'culture' in analytic frameworks (Mandalios, Arnason). Eschewing both social scientific 'systems' analysis and postcolonial and/or deconstructive approaches, theorists working within civilization theory turn instead to the historical, comparative and genealogical study of 'civilizational complexes' and forms thereby delineating a plethora of (different) 'types'

of modernity (Eisenstadt, Arnason). That is, admixtures and configurations of civilizational lineages *and* modern expressions or experiences of ‘disenchantment’ vis-à-vis science, capitalism and secularised reason. To explore this later innovation and move towards non-teleological explanations of social life we shall examine three major figures in the eclectic field of civilizational analysis: Benjamin Nelson, Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault. Each of them importantly, problematized the symbolic order of life without lapsing into a culturalistic reductionism, preferring instead to appropriate a long-term genealogical perspective onto the formation of different types of the *moderne* (multiple modernities). Hence from this perspective we find the import of a) rationales of meaning and universes of discourses formative of civilizational *complexes* (Nelson), b) extended networks of power with peculiar affect-structures (Elias) and c) technologies of the self and disciplinary practices formative of modern subjects (Foucault). More recently the explicit exposition of a ‘multiple modernities’ thesis can be found in the work of Shmuel Eisenstadt over the past two decades.

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Biographical Sketch

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