CHAPTER NINE

ONE WORLD, ONE MODERNITY

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I

Modernity is a very important concept in sociology; it might, in fact, be seen as the discipline’s most important concept as it stands for the very societal formation to whose emergence academic sociology itself is often said to owe its existence. Yet, despite its centrality, no consensus exists among sociologists as to what exactly the concept signifies, how it should be properly understood, defined and applied to social reality. We have assembled massive bodies of knowledge about specific aspects or particular areas of modern society, such as its complexity or its economic and political orders, but as valuable as such knowledge is, it does not provide a comprehensive view of the structure of modern society at large. For example, to conceptualise modern society as a capitalist society or as a liberal-democratic society doubtless illuminates important structural features of this society, but the picture it presents is nonetheless incomplete as it reduces, at least implicitly, the whole of society to one or two of its subsystems while diminishing the significance of other institutional sectors. Likewise, to characterise contemporary society as an industrial, post-industrial, knowledge, information or risk society is to highlight certain properties of socio-economically advanced societies while neglecting others. As long as students of modernity are aware of the limitations that such notions entail, this is not a problem. However, many scholars exhibit little such awareness. Then modern society, rather than having particular features, is equated with these features, and that is a problem because it gives rise to an overly simplistic understanding of this society.
A second problem facing any effort to come to terms with modernity is that the concept is not only used differently within sociology, but also between sociology and other academic disciplines. But while this is a problem that sociologists can do very little about, it should be in their interest to reach some agreement as to what they mean by modernity – as to how the term is (or ought to be) understood sociologically. That is the question I will be addressing in the pages ahead. In so doing, I will be drawing primarily on the differentiation theoretical school. To my knowledge, this school is the only tradition of social scientific thought that aims to offer a comprehensive theory of modern society. It has laid foundations that I believe no theorist interested in the ‘big picture’, in what is peculiar to modern society as against other societal formations, can sensibly ignore. The concept of modernity developed in this work is a very abstract one, thus permitting a great deal of variation on the ground. At the same time, it is sufficiently clear to turn it into a workable instrument of social analysis, allowing us to identify key characteristics of modern society.

Given the absence of any serious competitor on the theoretical plane, sociologists interested in conducting meaningful analyses of modernity must either work with (some variant of) this theory or propose an alternative that matches the former’s level of sophistication. Since such an alternative is presently not in sight, we have to make do with the conceptual tools that are available to us now. Based on this premise, section II offers a very basic sketch of Luhmann’s theory of modernity, which, for the purpose of this chapter, will be treated as an elaboration and extension of Parsons’ work, as well as that of other classics in the differentiation theoretical tradition (from Spencer via Marx to Durkheim and Weber). Following some remarks concerning the theory’s operationalisation for concrete social analyses, I will go on to discuss, and reject as misleading, one presently popular alternative, the conception of multiple modernities, in the light of this theory (section III). Utilising secondary data, section IV presents a number of empirical findings that lend support to differentiation and modernisation theoretical views about the consequences of development. Finally, I offer a brief conclusion as to what can be learned from the controversy about whether we should be talking about modernity in the singular or in the plural (section V). As the chapter’s title suggests, I prefer the former option.
Any attempt to make sense of the contemporary world must delimit its subject matter along the dimensions of space and time. In terms of space, we can either restrict ourselves to studying particular world regions or strive to cover the whole world, and temporally we may opt to analyse either very long trends of societal evolution or focus on shorter time spans. Most empirical work in sociology concerns itself with developments observed within, or affecting the populations of, single nation states, typically the ones the authors themselves reside in. Sometimes, the scope of analysis is extended beyond national boundaries to involve other countries as well. The countries selected for cross-national comparisons are usually from the same geographical or socio-culturally/politically defined region, although there are also (rare) examples of studies that aim to cover larger regions, sometimes the entire globe. The time horizon of this body of work mostly spans a few decades, from some point in the relatively recent past to the present. Substantively, it tends to be driven by a concern to capture and explain country-specific peculiarities and/or cross-national differences. The authors want to know what is unique to a given (mostly, their) country, or explore alternative (political) solutions to given social problems, and both requires comparison.

Much of the knowledge yielded by this research is informative and useful. It rarely has an immediate bearing on social theory though, especially on the theory of modernity. To be relevant for such a theory, one needs a different kind of knowledge, knowledge that spans longer time horizons and whose geographic scope is limited only by the boundaries of the globe itself. Such knowledge is what much of the classical body of sociological thought strives to produce. Luhmann’s theory of society, which like any grand sociological theory ultimately focuses on modern society, is no exception. It purports (or aims) to cover all of humanity’s history and all forms of social life our species has thus far developed. Consequently, it adopts a time horizon that spans millennia and a geographical horizon that spans the globe. Viewed from such a perspective, modernity appears as the outcome of probably no more than just two major transformations that human social organisation has thus far undergone (Kumar 1999). Any student of societal evolution is familiar with the threefold typology distinguishing tribal or archaic societies of hunters and gatherers from traditional societies that emerged after the Neolithic Revolution and culminated in the so-called high civilisations. Following this account, it took several thousand years for these
predominantly agrarian civilisations to work themselves out. The earliest signs of yet another epochal shift in the making appear around the late 15th century in Europe, where early forms of modern capitalism and the self-rule of an increasingly confident bourgeoisie in some of the continent’s economically leading cities begin to challenge the feudal order of the Middle Ages (without necessarily being aware of the ultimate consequences). Simultaneously, the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment that set in and gain momentum during the next two centuries erode the (Catholic) church’s monopoly of world interpretation (which is further subverted by the Protestant Reformation). As a result of these developments, politics, the economy and science, to a certain extent also the law, become more independent, gradually separate and emancipate themselves, from religion, and begin to form their own institutional (or, as Weber calls them, ‘life’) orders and ‘value spheres’ (Weber 1978), with religion itself being reduced to one such sphere among others, rather than reigning over all of them. It is only with the 18th century revolutions – the industrial-capitalist revolution in England, the political revolutions in America and France, and the educational revolution introducing mass education in parts of Europe and North America (Parsons 1971) – that the point of no return to the old order is reached. Thereafter, the new order quickly unfolds, although its final consolidation is still a matter of centuries, arguably accomplished only in the 20th century. At the same time, it slowly extends beyond the narrow boundaries of its northwest European birthplace; first through colonisation, later in subtler, but no less penetrating ways, and eventually reaching out to the whole world, reflecting modernity’s inherent globalism. If modernity ever was a ‘project’ then this was from the outset a globalising project, as none of its core constituents are ‘naturally’ confined to any particular world region. On the contrary, as Marx was perhaps the first to point out for the case of the capitalist economy, its internal logic drives it beyond all socially constructed (hence economically arbitrary) boundaries in the quest to draw the entire globe into one world market. Today, we can discern similar tendencies in the sciences, in medicine, in the media, in religion, and arguably also in the fields of politics and law, although the latter two spheres have thus far remained more nationally (or, in the case of the European Union, regionally) circumscribed than the former.

Luhmann’s theory (see Luhmann 1997, ch. 4) posits a similar sequence in the evolution of society, but rather than considering earlier forms of societal organisation primarily in negative terms, in terms of modernity’s discontinuities with the past, it characterises each stage
positively, namely by the mode of differentiation that dominates the social order at the respective stage. Thus, a differentiation of society into equal and relatively independent segments marks the first stage of societal evolution; an idea well known since the publication of Durkheim’s Division of Labour (Durkheim 1949). This stage is superseded when vertical stratification becomes the dominant mode of societal differentiation. Under this regime, society is differentiated into unequal, but interdependent strata, with ascribed and inherited status determining everyone’s place, function and (recognised and symbolically validated) worth in society. Finally, under modern conditions, stratificatory differentiation gives way to functional differentiation as the primary mode of societal differentiation. Functional differentiation means that a multitude of subsystems in charge of separate functions – such as making collectively binding decisions, the peaceful and rule-bound resolution of conflicts, the production of true knowledge, and so forth – emerge, all of which are necessary for society’s reproduction, but not easily prioritised in terms of their relative importance. At the level of their operational rules the various systems are structurally autonomous from one another, meaning that each follows its own peculiar sub-rationality or function logic and that each employs its own criteria for determining successful conduct within its domain. At the same time, all – or at least most – of these systems are mutually dependent on each other: No rational law, no modern capitalism, as Max Weber (1984) put it in the Protestant Ethic, and Luhmann adds several further dimensions of subsystem interdependence.

Key examples of the kinds of systems that Luhmann’s theory alludes to are the political system, the economic system, the legal system, the educational system, the medical system, science, etc. An important difference to Parson’s systems theory is that Luhmann does not limit the number of systems to just four (because he believes one cannot derive them deductively). A second, and related, difference is that in Luhmann’s conception, society’s systems are not primarily analytical but real entities – which means it is not up to the theorist to determine how many of them exist (and what exactly they do), but to societal evolution itself. Inclusion into any of modern society’s systems is premised to be an option for all individuals and to be based not on descent but on technical skills and qualifications or on (other) personal attributes that make a difference in the sphere in question; in short, on functional considerations. Luhmann does not believe that stratification disappears under the regime of functional differentiation. He does suggest, however, that it loses in relative significance, that (just like segmentation, which also does not
disappear) it is reduced to a secondary mode of societal differentiation, rather than reflecting the very order of society itself as it does under pre-modern conditions. One of the key indicators evidencing this shift in Luhmann’s view is the decreasing legitimacy that purely status-based claims to privileged treatment, which are taken for granted across spheres in pre-modern societies, are accorded within the new order (see Luhmann 2000). This de-emphasising of stratification sets his theory apart from Marxist and Neo-Marxist scholarship that focuses on the reproduction of seemingly unchanging class relations – but whose critique of persisting class structures arguably rests on the same normative and theoretical premise, namely that modern society has no legitimate place for ossified, unchanging patterns of hierarchy and inequality.

It is obvious that functional differentiation cannot be measured directly. Therefore, to operationalise the theory for empirical analyses, one has to target lower levels of abstraction and to translate the language of societal subsystems into a language of differentiated institutions. This is not straightforward because, from the viewpoint of the theory, the modernisation of society (and hence also institutional development) is an ongoing, open-ended process. Therefore, we cannot simply equate present institutions, even the seemingly most advanced ones, with modernity. Rather, we must leave open the possibility that ‘the modern condition’ is compatible with a variety of institutional forms (Therborn 2003) because functional equivalents may exist or emerge at later points in time that perform the same functions by different means and possibly equally well or even better. Moreover, since modern society puts a premium on continuous change, modernity, understood in institutional terms, is like a moving target, never fully accomplished anywhere, and always transforming, reinventing itself, hence unstable to the point of ‘liquidity’ (Bauman 2000). At the same time, once a structural innovation that enhances society’s productive (and adaptive) capacity has occurred somewhere, this fact alone alters the environment of all other societies, pressuring them to react (Bendix 1977) and to follow suit, lest they be left behind and severely disadvantaged in their positioning in the ‘world system’ (Wallerstein 1974) of global power relations. This, in turn, gives rise to further change. And so on ad infinitum.

However, even though our knowledge of past social, technological, and institutional change (and their continuous acceleration during the past two centuries) makes it easy to predict that the future will in all likelihood differ significantly from the present, any empirical analysis is bound by the limitations to which the past and the present subject our ‘sociological imagination’ (C. Wright Mills). Being shaped by the past, we are inclined
to extrapolate contemporary trends and thus to conceive the near future as an extension of the present. In other words, for us modernity cannot but have some definite forms, because we cannot transcend the horizon they delimit. Only the evolution of society itself can.

Acknowledging our intellectual parochialism, and recognising that our analyses are inevitably based on temporally, spatially and perhaps also culturally specific notions of modernity, the following institutions can be suggested to best epitomise our current (ideal typical) understanding of the structure of modern society: a rationalised (preferably democratic and representative) polity with accountable governments; a market (or capitalist) economy; the rule of law and a legal system guaranteeing a core set of human rights; bureaucratic administration based on ‘meritocratic’ (skill-oriented) recruitment and insulated from ‘special’ interests; a public (collectively run or regulated) welfare system covering the whole population and securing its basic needs; a system of formal mass schooling and education; research and development in large science organisations, etc. These are the kinds of institutions that nowadays come to mind when we speak of modernity. Most of them can take on fairly different forms: As is well known, various types of democracy (and forms of ‘good governance’ more generally) co-exist in the contemporary world; capitalism comes in more than one variety; the conception of right is inquisitorial in some countries and accusatory in others; diverse social policy regimes create unique patterns of welfare provision, etc. Yet, despite the multiplicity of forms in which they manifest themselves, these are the kinds of institutions that one (presently) expects to find in modern societies. We do, of course, know that we will not find them everywhere, and that enormous differences exist in their performance where variants of them are at least formally in place, but underperformance or total absence of (more than one of) the above institutions are widely viewed as signs of deficient and underdeveloped, not just as ‘different’ forms of modernity.

Such agreement did not always exist. The apparent early successes of the socialist world seemed to suggest an alternative modernity was possible and perhaps desirable. The collapse of socialism has shattered these perceptions and hopes; not completely, of course, because some continue to maintain them (see, e.g., Lin 2006), but by and large it is probably fair to say that for the time being it seems the market economy and the other aforementioned institutions have ‘won out’. Not surprisingly, therefore, they have increasingly assumed the character of ‘world models’ (Meyer et al. 1997), of reference points giving direction to developmental policies around the world and serving as measuring rods.
for assessing such policies’ success or failure. No alternative pointing systematically beyond them is presently in sight.

III

It is against this background that I will now discuss the fruitfulness of a conception of modernity that seemingly contradicts the above view, namely the multiple modernities approach of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and his followers. In contrast to the differentiation theoretical school, it posits that there is not one modernity, but a multitude of them. The different modernities whose existence is postulated for the contemporary world are rooted in different civilisations (such as European – or Western or Judeo-Christian – civilisation, Sinic – or Confucian – civilisation, Indian – or Hindu – civilisation, Arabic – or Islamic – civilisation, and so forth), and they crystallise in nation states, each of which ultimately constitutes a modernity of its own. The state is treated as the centre of any particular modernity, and given that each society, due to different historical trajectories, socio-cultural legacies and other contextual parameters defining its identity, translates the ‘cultural core’ or ‘spirit’ of modernity, its ‘programme’, differently into reality, no two societies/countries are exactly alike. Hence the notion of ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2000, Wittrock 2000).

That all countries are somehow unique is obviously true. Less evident is what social theoretic significance we should accord this fact. To determine its significance for a theory of modernity, one needs to know how the concept of modernity itself is understood within that theory. Regrettably though, a clear definition of this concept is conspicuously absent from the literature on multiple modernities, as even sympathetic observers have had occasion to note (see for example, Allardt 2005). In particular, the social structural and institutional peculiarities of modern societies are largely ignored. The cultural foundations of modernity, on which the multiple modernity approach primarily focuses, are traced back as far as the Axial Age some 2,500 years ago when, to quote Björn Wittrock (2005: 103), ‘deep-seated intellectual and cosmological shifts that occurred in different forms with striking (…) simultaneity across the Eurasian hemisphere’ for the first time in human history gave rise to a sense of the ‘malleability of human existence’ and to reflexivity, understood as ‘the ability to use reason to transcend the immediately given’ (ibid: 106). The common core of this change in the societal perception of human existence – comprising the three aspects of reflexivity, historicity, and agentiality – is said to be deeply culturally
impregnated and hence exhibits great variations across world regions. These variations, says Wittrock, importantly shape the modernities that he claims have emerged during the past few centuries following yet another major shift in human thought, that triggered by the European Enlightenment. Since then, a worldwide movement has been set in motion which promotes the ideas of free and equal citizenship lying at the heart of modernity’s ‘promissory notes’, as Wittrock calls them.

Modernity, as conceived of by the proponents of the multiple modernities school, is therefore first and foremost a cultural formation. The institutions of modernity are treated as products of the above ‘promises’ and of other cultural elements, manifestations of never ending efforts to put the ideas driving modernising agents to practice. Given the context-specificity of such efforts, their ‘fruits’ should be expected to assume different forms in different places too, so that even nations belonging to the same civilisation or culture can differ tremendously from each other. All societies/nation states are therefore historical individuals and should be treated and analysed accordingly. So fundamental are the differences between existing modernities, says Wittrock, that no social analyst can credibly argue any longer ‘that different cultural, religious and historical traditions will become increasingly irrelevant and eventually fade away in favour of one all-encompassing form of modernity and modernisation’ (ibid: 99).

The target of the latter claim is the modernisation theory of the 1950s and 1960s. Modernisation theory, which is conceptually anchored in the work of Talcott Parsons and best understood as a process theory of modernity, argues that modernisation is a homogenising process, ‘a process of social change whereby less developed societies acquire characteristics common to more developed societies’, as Daniel Lerner (1968: 386) put it. Societies undergoing modernisation should therefore become more similar over time. Like numerous other critics before them, the multiple modernists reject this view – on the grounds of both its alleged empirical falsity and normative dubiousness, given its reliance on ‘the’ Western (or, worse even, American) model as a yardstick for measuring developmental achievements around the world.

The normative criticism of modernisation theory is but a variation of an older claim that the theory serves to legitimise Western imperialism and hence is largely ideological. As such, it reflects the spirit of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism that left a deep imprint on the generation of social scientists which was educated from the mid-1960s to 1980s and which defined the agenda of social thought for decades to come. And while it doubtless has its merits as a self-critique of Western triumphalism,
this alone would not suffice to undermine modernisation theory’s empirical validity. Does successful modernisation result in similar societal outlooks, in ‘convergence’, then, or does it not?

The question may seem more straightforward than it is, for to answer it, one first needs to know what exactly convergence or difference ‘mean’. In particular, one needs to know what kinds of differences render modernisation theoretical convergence claims invalid from the viewpoint of multiple modernists (or other critics). That question, however, has thus far been largely left unanswered. As in the case of ‘modernity’, the meaning of ‘difference’ is shrouded in darkness in the multiple modernities literature, and the social theoretic significance of whichever differences its authors might have in mind is simply taken for granted. Yet, while the existence of (some form of) difference is undeniable, not all observable differences carry the same conceptual weight, especially for a theory of modernity. So we need criteria by which we can distinguish more from less important differences.

Eisenstadt (2005), in a rare instance of concreteness, recently gave one example of the kinds of differences he considers important enough to justify the language of multiple modernities, of modernity in the plural rather than in the singular. Thus, while the nation state has become a worldwide model of socio-political organisation, the conceptions of citizenship and collective identity that go hand in hand with its diffusion vary, with some countries opting for more ‘totalistic’ versions and others contending themselves with more ‘multifaceted’ ones that tolerate greater ethnic, religious and cultural heterogeneity of the citizenry. Such differences are indeed important, so important, as Eisenstadt reminds us, that they can become matters of life and death, for at least the ‘totalistic’ versions of nationhood and national identity have repeatedly served as seedbeds for war, genocide and other atrocities committed around the world.

However, that a difference is important in some respects does not automatically render it (equally) important for (all) other concerns. Differences become social theoretically significant only if it can be shown that they occupy a strategic place in the respective theory, which in the present case is a theory of modernity. Since the multiple modernities approach does not really specify what it means by modernity, it would be difficult to determine unequivocally whether the differences in question qualify for such a role even within its own conception. But be this as it may, what can be safely said is that the language of multiple modernities itself is justified only if the differences alluded to affect the foundations of modernity as a societal formation. Are the differences mentioned by
Eisenstadt of this theoretic magnitude? And would it be impossible for alternative social theoretic conceptions, such as that of differentiation theory and modernisation theory, to accommodate them?

I doubt it. To illustrate my scepticism with the example given by Eisenstadt himself, I think it would make more sense to treat the two versions of national identity and citizenship as instances of different degrees, rather than different types, of modernity/modernisation, with the totalistic variety, because of its strong reliance on primordial notions of communal membership, less in line with the empirical realities and normative expectations of modernity than the ‘multifaceted’ one. This argument presupposes that meaningful differences can be made between pre-modern and modern conditions, as well as between degrees of modernity or modernisation realised and achieved by different societies. Surprisingly though, the multiple modernities school, while very keen to expose other differences, denies, or at least is unwilling to consider the possibility, that such differences might persist in the present age. For from the perspective of this school, the whole world is equally modern now. All are modern, only differently modern.

A differentiation theoretical perspective raises doubts as to the soundness of this view. Take the example of India. India has been a political democracy since its independence in 1947, and thus, politically speaking, certainly more modern than, say, China, 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, and continues to exclude millions of citizens from even minimal education, basic health care, genuine social mobility, (real) political influence, legal protection etc.; indeed, in some of the least developed northern states, arguably from any kind of ‘agentiality’ (Wittrock) that deserves its name. Such a social structure is incompatible with modernity because it is based on categorical inequalities that subvert the principle of functional differentiation by erecting virtually insurmountable barriers between the underprivileged and the privileged. It also subverts the proper functioning of many formally modern institutions, which it effectively turns 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). In other words, for large segments, if not the majority of India’s population, stratification continues to be the primary mode of differentiation because they are locked into their low position of the status hierarchy. To the extent that this is the case, India is not a modern, but a
pre-modern country, or more plausibly, a semi-modern country that blends modern elements with non-modern ones.

In China, on the other hand, we also find enormous social inequalities, especially income disparities, which have in fact exploded since the country’s transition to capitalism from 1978 onwards. But while these inequalities are certainly deplorable, they are first and foremost gradual inequalities, permitting much greater social mobility than in India. One indicator of this mobility is that many of the millions of new small and medium-sized businesses that have sprung up throughout the country since the late 1970s were founded by former peasants who thus improved their livelihood enormously (Fishman 2004). Another is the emergence of a sizable middle class whose members often come from very poor families and whose ranks are constantly swelling. Socio-economically, China would therefore seem to be more modern than India, while India would be ahead of China’s modernity in terms of the political and legal systems, as well as possibly in other dimensions.

Regardless of whether one agrees with this assessment, treating all countries and world regions on a par with regard to their modernness does not seem very plausible. However, if one grants the possibility of differential degrees of modernisation, then one needs criteria by which to judge particular cases. Differentiation theory proposes one such criterion, the extent to which functional differentiation has been realised, and modernisation theory adds others, e.g., the level of socio-economic development and the spread of modern institutions, as outlined in section two. Further criteria could be added. And while any proposal is debatable, the latter 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 far too much of relatively minor differences in the expressive cultures of contemporary nation states and in the dispositions of intellectual elites; of, as John Meyer (2000: 245) put in bluntly, ‘things that in the modern system do not matter’.

Contrary to a wide-spread perception, modernisation theory and differentiation theory can easily accommodate differences in the institutional designs and collective identities (or semantics, in Luhmann’s parlance) of nation states, because their concept of modernity is sufficiently abstract to permit a great deal of diversity at this level of societal aggregation (see Parsons 1964; Smelser 1968), where reality is far more variable than at the level of the macro-structure determined by society’s (predominant) mode of differentiation. Neither school of thought emphasises such variation very much, but since it does not affect modern society’s fundamental building blocks, that which distinguishes modernity
from other societal formations, they rightly ignore it, because (unless and until proven otherwise) it has no bearing on their 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 conceptualise varieties of this sort, one had better resort to various ‘middle range’ theories, as famously proposed (but unduly privileged over ‘grand theory’) by Robert Merton.

IV

I will now very briefly look at several post-World War II developments that I believe lend support to some of modernisation theory’s main propositions regarding the consequences of development (see Huntington 1971 for a concise summary). My point of departure 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, in a sense, 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 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. In other regions, where it set in much later, the decline of the peasantry was even more rapid. As late as the early 1980s, only three world regions/countries remained dominated by agriculture: sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and China. In China, this is now also a matter of the past, with over 50 per cent of the workforce employed in manufacturing and services since the early years of the new millennium (Schmidt 2007). Given these regions’ population share, 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. It was in the city that humans were first liberated from the tyranny of the soil and ‘rescued’, as Marx and Engels (1997: 42) put it in the Communist Manifesto, ‘from the idiocy of rural life’; that they could develop more specialised skills, learn from others, study, nurture their creative potentials, etc. 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 economic transformation of newly industrialising 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 (e.g., whether one believes it is a more positive or rather negative development), life in the city undoubtedly differs radically from that in the countryside.

Another 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. That much, however, has now been accomplished.

One of the effects of industrialisation has been historically unprecedented levels of wealth. Income per capita for the world as a whole increased eightfold between 1820 and 1990. However, as much as 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. 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 also initially 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 continuing 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 quite 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, the living levels enjoyed by this presently 1.7 billion people strong group, and in fact by several hundred million people more that have escaped the most extreme forms of poverty, reflect ‘the greatest advance in the condition of the world’s population ever achieved in such a brief span of time’ (Easterlin 2000: 7).

Industrialisation, urbanisation, 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 liberates 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, labour 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 the degrees of penetration obviously differ enormously (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 individually, 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* (as Hobsbawm rightly deems them in his seminal work), 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.

But note that most of the turning points signaling the ultimate transition to modernity were reached even later than in Hobsbawm’s account: two to three decades before, or a few years into, the new millennium, rather than during the 1950s when the development really just took off. 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), echoing much like-minded scholarship before him, 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 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’, as we understand it today, has so far probably arrived only in two world regions, namely the 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 neighbourhood. 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 modernisation, including those pertaining to the problem of ‘convergence’ and/or ‘diversity’. Needless to say, neither claim can be validated or invalidated by *purely* empirical means, as much depends on how the terms are used in the pertinent literature. Empirical observations nevertheless provide some tentative hints.

A first element that East Asian and Western modernity share, and that arguably differentiates both of them more from *other* world regions than from *each* other, is the ‘systemic’ quality of the modernisation 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). Modernisation in these two regions, rather than being confined to particular sectors of society and to certain segments of the population, has been and continues to be an *all-inclusive* phenomenon, transforming every aspect of societal organisation and the lives of all members of society in a very short time span. A second, and related, aspect that the respective modernisation processes share is the direction of change. With minor variations, comparable political, administrative, juridical, economic, scientific, educational, welfare etc. systems are in place that pursue largely similar goals, run similar institutional programmes, 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 or ‘best practices’ to be emulated, or pitfalls to be avoided, at home. Major policy reforms pioneered and successfully implemented by one country 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, 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 organisations, 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 similar levels of modernisation/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, for aiding the poor, and for enabling even the socially least advantaged to develop their capabilities, in place. 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 (and rapidly increasing) 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 both systems vary slightly from country to country, they share key premises, technologies and organisational characteristics, not the least of which is a common knowledge base. One could easily go on like this.

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 modernisation theory were correct, then we would expect greater homogeneity within socio-economically similar groups than among people of similar ethnic and civilisational 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 favours 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 and institutional 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 (as it is understood and understands itself today).

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 juridical system, in the educational system, in the science sector, 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 modernisation theory got it right. Hence the title of this chapter: one world, one modernity.

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 or 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 social structural realities in different modern countries (or other societal entities) yields 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 polities 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 conceptualisations 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 analysing *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/democracy, 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.

**References**


