How Unique is East Asian Modernity?\textsuperscript{1}

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Abstract
The article examines Shmuel Eisenstadt’s claim that Japan constitutes a unique modernity, one that differs fundamentally from Western modernity. Since this claim, like the multiple modernities approach founded by Eisenstadt, is directed against the convergence thesis of classical modernisation theory, that thesis’ meaning is first briefly reconstructed. Moreover, to stand Eisenstadt’s case on a broader basis, the four tiger states (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore) are added to the sample, thus extending Japanese modernity to a larger East Asian modernity. These five countries are then compared with the five largest Western countries along several dimensions that seem to be particularly salient for probing modernisation theory. Surprisingly, the comparison fully confirms the theory. The article then moves on to assess Eisenstadt’s claim in light of his own conceptualisation of modernity. This conceptualisation renders his proposal more plausible, but at considerable cost. The conclusion is devoted to asking how Eisenstadt’s substantive concerns could be met without reading too much into his empirical findings.

Keywords
multiple modernities, modernisation theory, convergence, diversity, culturalism

The great wealth-producing nations of western Europe, North America and much of East Asia share common features that set them apart from the world of 200 years ago, and also from today’s developing nations (Myers, 2007:10).

I
A protracted debate in the social sciences concerns the similarity or distinctness of modern societies. The position emphasizing similarities is often inspired by some version of modernisation theory, a macro-sociological approach developed in the 1950s and 1960s for studying global social change, in particular the prerequisites and consequences of the spread of modernity. Scholars leaning to the opposite view come from otherwise highly diverse intellectual

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traditions but are united in their aversion to that theory. One of its most outspoken critics is Shmuel Eisenstadt, a former champion of modernisation theory, who devised the ‘multiple modernities’ paradigm in an effort to pluralise the concept of modernity and to shed light on differences between modern societies. The gist of this paradigm is expressly directed against modernisation theory, especially against that theory’s convergence claim accentuating modern societies’ commonalities. This claim, 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 organisation that are doubtless modern, yet clearly different from Western modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000a:1), the reference model for most studies investigating modernisation processes in non-Western locations.

Given that Japan was the first non-Western country to become fully modern, Eisenstadt has singled it out as the ‘most important test case’ for the convergence claim. He acknowledges that the reasons behind Japan’s modernisation may have been similar to those of its Western forerunners, yet maintains that the patterns of modernity that emerged from the process are 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:110f.). Hence, the notion of a unique Japanese modernity.

The aim of the present article is to scrutinise this proposition. But rather than confining myself to Japan, following Tu (2000) I have decided to add the four so-called tiger states of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore to the sample, which not only equal Japan in its modernisation success, but also share a common cultural heritage with it, namely Confucianism. Since multiple modernities is Eisenstadt’s attempt at a cultural turn, an effort to argue that enduring cultural traditions have a profound effect on modern societies that prevent their convergence, he would probably find this treatment of Japanese modernity as part of a larger East Asian modernity agreeable, not

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2 As is well known, modernisation theory has been criticised from many angles and for multiple reasons. Here, I focus exclusively on multiple modernists’ criticism of the theory’s convergence claim. Given this limited purpose, I cannot address other criticisms levelled at the paradigm.

3 Tu (2000:218) treats these five countries as the currently most advanced exemplars of East Asian modernity, which he characterises as ‘particularly intriguing’ for debates revolving around the subject of this article.
least because it stands the comparison with Western modernity on a broader basis, thus potentially strengthening his case.4

Before proceeding with the empirical analysis, however, the pertinent premises of modernisation theory must be briefly reiterated. Their reconstruction will supply us with the criteria by which we are to carry out the comparison (Section II). As it turns out, Eisenstadt’s case appears rather weak when judged by these criteria, which generate little evidence for the existence of a unique Japanese or, for that matter, East Asian modernity (Section III).5

Judging the proposal in light of his own conception of modernity, the case gains in plausibility, but only at the cost of trivialising the concept of modernity and other problems associated with Eisenstadt’s theory (Section IV). The article closes with a few remarks on how the two approaches could cross-fertilise each other if treated as complementary, rather than as opposing paradigms (Section V).

II

As indicated above, the main point of contention between modernisation theory and multiple modernists is the former’s claim that modernisation is a homogenising process resulting in 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), one of the theory’s leading advocates, puts it. But what does modernisation theory actually mean by ‘convergence’? To answer this question, it is important to keep in mind that modernisation theory is conceptually anchored in

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4 Given that seven out of 10 East Asians live in China, one might wonder why China was not also included in the sample. The reason is that the main purpose of this article is to scrutinise the plausibility of Eisenstadt's criticism of modernisation theory's convergence claim; this claim refers to societal entities of roughly similar levels of socio-economic development. China's current level of development is in many ways similar to that of Albania. But as little as the possible finding of 'fundamental' differences between, say, Albania and Sweden would qualify to substantiate or refute claims about the unity or diversity of European modernity, as little sense would it make to liken Japan and the four tigers to China in terms of their modernness. Hence, China's exclusion.

5 One way of reading that part of the article is to treat it as a reminder of what it takes to criticise a theory properly. Being uncomfortable with some of its premises does not suffice. To come up with a sound criticism, we first have to try to understand these premises’ intended meaning(s). Then we can subject them to conceptual or empirical criticism if we have reason to believe there is something wrong with them. But we cannot confront a theory with evidence that, given its premises, has no (or at best very little) bearing on it. As will become clear below, I try to argue that multiple modernists (Eisenstadt in particular) do precisely that. Hence, their failure to come up with a potent challenge to modernisation theory.
the work of Talcott Parsons. As is well known, Parsons’ theory of modernity is embedded in a more encompassing theory of action systems (for a brief summary, see Turner, 2003, ch. 3). Society, in Parsons’ conceptualisation, is a subsystem of the social system, which in turn is one of four subsystems of the general action system, the other three being the cultural system, the personality system, and the behavioural organism.

Modernisation theory concerns itself only with the social, cultural and personality systems. It argues that upon modernisation the personality system becomes increasingly achievement oriented, aware of its own individuality, and empathetic; that modernisation leads to rationalisation, value generalisation and the diffusion of secular norms in the cultural system; 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; Levy, 1966; Parsons, 1964, 1977).

Much like other macro-sociological approaches, modernisation 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, the legal system and the system of mass media, are also examined. In the economy, the most salient change from the viewpoint of modernisation theory is the emergence of self-sustained growth; in politics, it is growing participation by the population; in education, the spread of mass schooling; in science, the establishment of the research university and other institutions engaged in systematic knowledge production; in law, the enunciation of universalistic, highly abstract norms and their application by professionally trained, independent judges; in the media, the rapid diffusion of information to mass audiences and, thus, the creation of public opinion.

The principle of functional differentiation, while highlighting a key, perhaps the key difference to the structure of pre-modern society whose mode of societal organisation is dominated by the stratification system, is institutionally underdetermined and, hence, compatible with a variety of institutional forms. The main source of inspiration guiding modernisation theory’s understanding of the institutional make-up of modern society is, once again, Parsons’ work, this time his theory of evolutionary universals. In an influential article outlining that theory, Parsons associates the progression of stages of societal

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6 Lerner (1968:388), for instance, views economic development as the ‘prime mover’ of modernisation and scholars employing a broadly modernisation theoretical frame of analysis have repeatedly emphasized the importance of political initiative for successful ‘late’ modernisation (see, for example, Bendix, 1970). On how this translated into the politics of modernisation advocated by various modernisation theorists, see Berger (2003).
evolution with critical breakthroughs in social organisation 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 organisation* of public and private institutions (see Parsons, 1964).  

This characterisation obviously bears much resemblance to ‘the’ Western model of modernity, to which it does indeed owe a lot. Note, however, that it does not reflect a consensual position shared by all modernisation theorists. Samuel Huntington, for instance, in his book *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968), offers a less demanding conceptualisation 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 that between governments which really govern the country under their formal jurisdiction and those that do not. A modern political order, on his conceptualisation, is a system of rationalised authority wherein office holders are expected to serve the public (rather than primarily 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 regimes that, if they manage to garner a modicum of support, can serve as functional equivalents, during the early stages of transition to modernity even as promising alternatives, to democratic systems in Huntington’s view.  

Parsons too allowed for more than one route to modernity and for differential institutionalisation of its ‘program’, as can be seen from his treatment of

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7 On the last page of his article, Parsons (1964:357) identifies the institutionalisation of research and development (‘scientific investigation and technological application of science’) as what he might well have called a fifth evolutionary universal, arguing this structural complex has come to assume the same significance as the other four in the 20th century.  
8 In the 1950s and 1960s, when modernisation theory was most influential, few consolidated democracies existed even in (Western) Europe. The Iberian peninsula was governed by dictatorial regimes; Greece, after a long period of political instability, experienced a military coup in 1967; Italy continued to be divided into a ‘civic’ north and a south dominated by hierarchical patron-client relations (on the Italian case, see Putnam, 1993); and West Germany, upon which democracy had in effect been imposed by the victors of the Second World War, was still struggling with a highly authoritarian legacy. The case for identifying ‘the’ Western model with political democracy would, therefore, have been much weaker than it may appear today.  
9 As argued forcefully by Berger (2003), other authors also emphasized successful state- and nation-building over and above establishing a democratic polity. This is especially true of modernisation theorists who were more or less directly involved in (US foreign) policy designation.
the Soviet Union as a near equal to the United States with respect to the depth and levels of modernisation it had 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 explicitly stated his belief that there could be ‘[great] variations within the modern type of society’ (Parsons, 1977:228) and that many more 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 modernisation, a process that Parsons viewed as far from complete. Convergence, thus understood, occurs when modernising countries meet two main conditions. First, they must move toward establishing a set of key institutions that the theory regards as essential to modernity, and second, they must succeed in making these institutions perform in line with their stated purposes, rather than being mere ‘façades’ (Meyer et al., 1997) of modernity.

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10 It would, therefore, be wrong to equate ‘convergence’, as understood by modernisation theory, with ‘identity’. No modernisation theorist believed any two countries would ever be exactly alike. The same is of course true of the literature suggesting the contemporary social world is best conceived of as one globally encompassing world society.

11 Parsons was not the only modernisation theorist holding such views. See, for instance, Lerner (1958, ch. 3), Levy (1966) and Smelser (1968). Levy (1966:709) expressly speaks of a trend toward growing structural uniformity and Marsh (2008:801), who anchors his research in Levy's version of modernisation theory, emphasizes that no two modern countries ever become identical despite structural convergence because whatever they learn from each other has to pass through a cultural filter. Awareness of the cultural impregnation of institutions is no preserve of modernisation theory's critics.

12 Some of the most important of these institutions are: 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 organisations; etc.

13 This qualification is necessary in view of the findings of sociological neo-institutionalism. As John Meyer and his colleagues have shown in many studies (Meyer et al., 1997, provides the best summary), the contemporary world exhibits a striking degree of institutional isomorphism. They also note, however, that formal institutional structures are often ‘decoupled’ from actual
Modernisation theorists are aware that many obstacles have to be overcome to meet these conditions, and that the processes through which this may occur are risky, complex, painful (often traumatic and violent; on this aspect, see especially Huntington, 1971:290) and contested, with the outcomes always uncertain. They know there is no guarantee of success, but where modernisation does succeed, they expect society to enhance its performance in virtually all spheres: in the economy, in politics, in the law, in education, in the sciences, in medicine, etc.

These expectations provide us with the criteria by which we are to determine the correctness or falsity of modernisation theory’s convergence claim. To refute this claim using Japanese or East Asian modernity as a test case we have to show that (1) the basic structure of society in East Asia and/or (2) the performance of its main subsystems differ profoundly from their counterparts in the West. If no evidence of such divergence can be found, then modernisation theory must be deemed confirmed.

III
Having established the requisite criteria, I now proceed with the comparison. The USA, Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy were chosen as representatives of Western modernity on the grounds of their being the largest Western countries. The data come from a number of sources and studies that cover both country groups or (much of) the entire globe. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a good starting point. It is a summary measure used by the United Nations to rank all member states for which sufficient information is available by level of human development, understood as the combined effect of life expectancy, educational attainment and gross domestic product (GDP) adjusted by purchasing power parity (PPP). The index is constantly updated and published in regular Human Development Reports. The index for 2009 (UNDP, 2009) is based on data for 2007.

Since Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations, it is not included in the HDI. Therefore, the data for Taiwan (also referring to 2007) draw upon institutional practice, meaning that there is a substantial mismatch between the seeming adoption of a particular model and its factual implementation and performance, an observation that gives rise to various diagnoses of institutional failure. For modernisation theory, a merely symbolic adherence to shared models does not suffice to carry the notion of convergence; similarity, in this approach, means similar results too.

14 The most recent index (UNDP, 2010) has been constructed using a method that differs from the one utilised for past indexes. Since that method is not yet fully accepted, I have decided to draw on the 2009 report.
the CIA World Factbook, which is only available in electronic form. Table 1 below presents the figures. Countries are listed by ‘group membership’ and population size.

All nine United Nations member states fall into the ‘high human development’ category. Since Taiwan’s figures are either better or similar to those of South Korea, it is safe to conjecture that the country would be placed in the same category if it were included in the index. A closer look at the index itself reveals that no non-Western country is currently ahead of any East Asian country from our sample. The best performer outside either region is oil-rich Brunei Darussalam (rank no. 30), with Chile and Argentine (nos. 44 and 49, respectively) the highest ranked industrialised countries.

The HDI confirms Eisenstadt’s point about Japan being the best test case for the convergence claim and it also confirms my point that this case can be sensibly extended to the four tigers. But while certainly suggestive, it is too narrow a measure for settling the dispute about the similarity or diversity of Western and Japanese/East Asian modernity, which requires a closer look at society’s main subsystems. As for their institutional design, it is well known that all ten countries resemble each other in a formal sense. Thus, politically, they are all sovereign nation-states (or semi-sovereign quasi states)\(^{15}\) with legal

\(^{15}\)As in the case of Hong Kong, which is actually a ‘special administrative region’ within the People’s Republic of China (PRC) but is nonetheless treated as a separate entity in much of the
bureaucratic governments; economically, they all practice variants of what Weber calls ‘modern capitalism’; and all of them have established differentiated legal, educational, scientific, medical systems — precisely as modernisation theory predicts. That neither Hong Kong, nor Singapore is a Western-style liberal democracy has no bearing on this finding; for one thing, because their combined populations represent just five percent of our East Asian sample, for another, because democracy is not a prerequisite of political modernity in modernisation theoretical thought anyway.

So, in terms of the basic structure of societal organisation, there is clearly convergence. However, since variants of the above institutions have been established almost everywhere, homologies of this sort need not be very instructive. It may be true that the whole world follows more or less the same models of development but it is also true that huge gaps often exist between talk and action, between the official language in which society describes itself and the actual performance of its institutions. For example, that a political organisation calls itself a government need not mean it really governs the territorial space in question, that it possesses the monopoly over the means of violence, that it collects taxes, that it channels them into the state’s budget, that it provides collective goods to the people, etc., as the literature on weak and ‘failed states’ (see, for example, Rotberg, 2003) plainly demonstrates. Analogous observations have been made about other subsystems of society, such as the legal system (Transparency International, 2007), the educational system (de Ferranti et al., 2004; Drèze and Sen, 2002), or the scientific system (Drori et al., 2003).

Modernisation theory expects institutional performance to co-vary with levels of socio-economic development. Since the countries comprising our sample are all highly developed, they should resemble each other in this respect too. The HDI suggests they do that to some extent but it provides only limited information on select indicators. For instance, it says nothing about the quality of political systems, legal systems, educational systems, scientific systems, all of which matter to our reference problem.

Luckily, a number of other indexes exists that can be drawn upon to complement the HDI. Two such indexes were chosen for making comparisons between political systems. They are the freedom index of Freedom House, an influential American think-tank devoted to the promotion of freedom and democracy, and the worldwide governance indicators of Daniel Kaufmann

social science literature due to its peculiar history, relative autonomy and level of development. Needless to say, the PRC also treats Taiwan as a (renegade) province, but realistically speaking it makes more sense to consider Taiwan as a separate unit because it is a nation-state in all but its recognised status.
and his co-authors from the World Bank, which rest on a much wider data basis than the Freedom House index. The rationale for choosing these two indexes is that both measure features that are widely viewed as essential for determining the quality of modern political systems, while differing in their respective biases.

Freedom House ranks polities (currently 193 countries and 15 related and disputed territories) according to the degree of freedom (understood as political rights and civil liberties) they provide, the assumption being that liberal democracies are best suited to fostering freedom. Each polity is rated on a seven-point scale for both criteria, with 1 representing the most free and 7 the least free, and then classified according to three broad categories: free (F), partly free (PF) and not free (NF). To fine-tune the measurement, the concepts of political rights and civil liberties are disaggregated into three and four sub-categories, respectively, with the sum-total in all sub-categories determining a polity’s overall ranking. Ratings in the single sub-categories are indicated using a 16-point scale, with 16 representing the best and 1 the worst performance. All ratings are based on annually repeated surveys and aim to reflect real-world freedoms and rights enjoyed by the populations in question. Table 2 presents the results for the overall freedom ratings plus those for one of the sub-categories, namely ‘rule of law’. The ratings for rule of law are included in the table, firstly, because no studies exist that compare the performance of legal systems separately on a global scale, and secondly, because the rule of law is also one of the indicators used by Kaufmann et al. (2008) to assess the quality of governance, thus permitting a direct comparison between the two indexes.

Kaufmann et al. (2008) distinguish six indicators to measure the governance performance of 212 polities: voice and accountability; political stability and absence of violence; government effectiveness; regulatory quality; rule of law; and control of corruption. Ratings are based on perceptions of a large and fairly diverse set of stakeholders surveyed by numerous organisations,

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16 They are ‘electoral process’, ‘political pluralism and participation’ and ‘functioning of government’ for political rights, and ‘freedom of expression and belief’, ‘associational and organizational rights’, ‘rule of law’ and ‘personal autonomy and individual rights’ for civil liberties.

17 Critics have raised concern though that Freedom House might not always provide an accurate picture of people’s real freedoms because it measures ‘only the extent to which civil and political liberties are institutionalized, which does not necessarily reflect the extent to which liberties are actually respected by political elites’ (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005:153). Likewise, Freedom House does not sufficiently distinguish between formal and effective democracy (ibid.:158).

18 This index could be charged with being slightly economistic, as the effects of institutions on economic performance seem to weigh heaviest in their overall judgment.
including Freedom House, whose data are factored into the aggregated country scores. Scores range from −2.50 to 2.50, with higher scores corresponding to better performance. Annual repetitions of the procedure aim to capture changes over time, with gradual extensions of the data basis made to improve the ratings’ reliability. Table 2 presents the latest scores for four of the six indicators. Rule of law focuses on the extent to which legal rules are publicly observed, in particular the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police and the courts. Voice and accountability measures attributes similar to those used by Freedom House to determine degrees of freedom and democracy. Government effectiveness refers to the quality of public goods and the civil service, independence of the administration from political pressure, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of governments’ commitment to formally adopted policies. And corruption control stands for the bureaucratic quality of government: The degree to which public offices are filled on the basis of technical skills (rather than social capital) and used to serve the public (rather than for private gain, as in the case of capture of the state by powerful elite groups).

Table 2 shows two main things. Firstly, it shows that the rankings assigned most countries are relatively close to each other in most respects. Secondly, Freedom House and Kaufmann et al. rate the performance of Singapore’s rule of law on the one hand, and Italy’s on the other, quite differently. Thirdly, both indexes concur that Singapore and Hong Kong are not liberal democracies, although Hong Kong’s voice and accountability scores are only slightly lower than those of South Korea and Taiwan, the two ‘youngest’ democracies in the region. At the same time, Singapore outperforms all other countries in terms of governmental effectiveness and corruption control, while Italy is a relative underperformer in most dimensions of governance except the extent to which citizens are free to select the legislature, to express their views and ideas, and to form political interest groups — a dimension in which Western countries are generally, if mostly moderately, ahead of their East Asian counterparts. But as telling as the variation in some dimensions of political modernity may be, it is too small to support the notion of ‘fundamental’ differences between East and West, especially between Japan (Eisenstadt’s test case) and the West.

19 Too small, that is, in terms of this article’s reference problem: The refutation (or confirmation) of modernisation theory’s convergence claim. Critics of this assessment might object in two ways: (1) They could say my reconstruction of that claim is problematic (faulty, not in line with modernisation theory’s ‘true’ spirit, etc.), in which case other criteria than the ones listed at the end of Section II would be needed to ‘test’ the claim, or (2) they could say convergence thus understood is ill-conceived, in which case a different conceptualisation of the term would be
The findings on economic modernity corroborate this assessment. Table 3 compares the two regions’ economic performance, based on United Nations/World Factbook GDP per capita data and the annual growth rates for nine out of the ten countries over an 18 years period, as well as the global competitiveness index developed by the World Economic Forum. That index gauges the competitiveness of 133 national economies around the world. Because of space restrictions, only three of the altogether 12 ‘pillars of competitiveness’ examined by the forum are included in the table, namely institutions, infrastructure and innovation (all of which are considered highly important in the pertinent literature), together with the overall ratings of the economies in question.

needed. Note, however, that criticism of the second type would miss the article’s point, namely to probe Eisenstadt’s criticism of modernisation theory, for which we have to take that theory’s conceptualisation as our point of departure, regardless of what we make of it. And in terms of that theory’s premises, some variation in the way the ‘executive leaders’ of the state administration, as Weber (1978:985) called the ruling elites of a modern polity, are selected is indeed a relatively minor affair — at least when compared with the conditions prevailing in a patrimonial state, to which both modernisation theory and Weber contrast it.

20 The other nine pillars are: macroeconomic stability, health and primary education, higher education and training, goods market efficiency, labour market efficiency, financial market sophistication, technological readiness, market size, and business sophistication.
As the table shows, all ten countries are amongst the globally leading economies, with the partial exception of Italy, which, as in the political field, falls behind in several dimensions, especially in those indicative of future prospects. Other than that one finds more commonalities than differences or markers of East Asian exceptionalism. The higher growth rates exhibited by the less mature ‘tiger’ economies are in accordance with economic growth theory, which (can be viewed as an economic ‘offshoot’ of modernisation theory and) claims that late developers can grow faster until they catch up with earlier developers (see, for example, Abramovitz, 1986) if they manage to create the conditions for sustained growth, as East Asia doubtless has. Other than the West, East Asia is in fact the only world region whose economy has grown consistently during the past half century (Maddison, 2001).

Educational modernity is a field in which East Asia seems to be at the forefront of global developments. Table 3 presents select findings from various studies analysing the performance of educational and scientific institutions around the world, as well as expenditures on research and development (R&D), the number of scientists employed per million people, and the number of patents granted per million residents. The PISA study of 2006 (OECD, 2007) ranks 57 countries according to the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old secondary science students; the TIMMS student achievement studies (Martin

Table 3: Economic systems

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* CIA World Factbook, 2009
et al., 2008a,b) present results for fourth and eighth grade students from over 40 countries in mathematics, science and reading. Neither study includes all countries from our sample, but comparing the results of both across educational fields and age groups, East Asian countries clearly emerge as top of the global league. The Western countries of our sample mostly come in a good second, although several East European countries, such as Russia, Kazakhstan, Latvia and Hungary, outperform them in some dimensions. Still, globally speaking, the differences between East Asian and Western educational institutions are negligible; far more significant differences are discernable between the two groups as a whole and the rest of the world: Virtually all of Africa, Latin America, South Asia and the Middle East. The same picture emerges in tertiary education, a field in which the West is still ahead of the East — both in terms of the total number of universities represented amongst the global top 500 and when adjusting numbers of well-performing universities by population size. However, East Asian universities are rapidly catching up with their Western role models and East Asia is now the only non-Western region boasting a sizeable group of world class universities. This trend is likely to continue since much of East Asia has only just begun to build up its university sector and is massively investing in it. Expenditures in R&D show the same trend, with the two ‘deviant’ cases (Italy and Hong Kong) signaling greater intra- than inter-regional divergence. The same holds for numbers of researchers, patents and publications.21 And even though it is true that East Asia displays a certain bias toward the hard sciences while placing less emphasis on arts and social science disciplines than do Western universities and research organisations, scientific modernity in both regions too has clearly moved in common directions during the past few decades.22

Adding qualitative analyses to the quantitative performance indicators presented above, as well as studies covering further institutional sectors of society, such as healthcare (WHO, 2000) or social welfare (Schmidt, 2008), yields the same picture. There are differences — within the West, within East Asia and between the two regions — but none of them are truly substantial.

That means the convergence claim is also confirmed on our second criterion, the performance of society’s subsystems. No evidence of Japanese or East Asian ‘uniqueness’ can be detected in the central features of societal modernity

21 On scientific publications, which are not covered here, see, for example, Unesco (2010:13) which speaks of the USA, Europe and Asia (mainly East Asia) as the world’s new scientific ‘triad’, with Asia poised to become the dominant player in the decades ahead.

22 More recently, East Asia has also begun to expand ‘the socially relevant sciences’, thus relatively decreasing the emphasis on engineering and the natural sciences (Drori et al., 2003:247).
Table 4: Education, science, research and development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>OECD</th>
<th>Matin et al.</th>
<th>Jiao Tong University</th>
<th>UNDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Science competence, secondary students (rank)</td>
<td>Math achievements, fourth grade students (rank)</td>
<td>Universities ranked among World Top 500 (number)</td>
<td>R&amp;D expenditures (as % of GDP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>11</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: OECD: PISA, 2007
Martin et al., 2008: TIMMS International Mathematics Report 2007
Jiao Tong University: Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2009
* Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2006
** Indermit Gill and Homi Kharas, An East Asian Renaissance, World Bank, 2007
*** Data refer to England

as understood by modernisation theory. Adding further aspects of development — levels of urbanisation (UNDP, 2007), GDP by sector of the economy (Gill and Kharas, 2007), composition of the labour force by occupation and sex (CIA, 2009), demographic change and fertility (Jones et al., 2008), the status and role of women in society (Bulbeck, 2005; Peng, 2003), marriage, divorce rates and lifestyles (Jones, 2005; Quah, 2008), everyday values (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005) — once again reveals more commonalities than differences and, given the lesser progression of developmental time in East Asia, even more importantly, remarkably similar trends.

Common trends of social change and development are also visible in other world regions (see, for example, Easterlin, 2000; Hobsbawm, 1994; Marsh, 2008; UNDP, 2010, ch. 2). However, once we extend the scope of our analysis

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23 Needless to say, the observation also holds the other way around, i.e., with regards to ‘Western’ or ‘European’ modernity if we look at it from the vantage point of East Asian modernity.
to the entire globe, we also find something else, namely (1) that the countries comprising our sample share features that set them more apart from the rest of the world than from each other, and (2) that performance differences seem to follow a coherent pattern across societal subsystems, such that countries showing weak performance in one dimension typically do so in other dimensions as well and vice versa. There are, to be sure, exceptions. Not all countries confirm the expectations derived from level of socio-economic development in all fields, but when considering the world as a whole, modernisation clearly appears as a ‘systemic’ process, with ‘changes in one factor [...] related to and affect[ed by] changes in other factors’ (Huntington, 1971:288) — just as modernisation theory predicts.

IV

To the extent that Eisenstadt wants to refute modernisation theory using Japan (or East Asia) as a test case, his attempt is a failure. For if we judge our sample in light of that theory’s premises, as we must if we want to disprove it, then we find no evidence questioning its validity. Quite the contrary, reality accords remarkably well with its premises. However, failure to discredit modernisation theory does not necessarily invalidate his case for multiple modernities and for the uniqueness of Japanese (or East Asian) modernity because, as will become clear presently, that case rests on propositions and evidence that might merit conceptual attention even if it had no direct bearing on other schools of social thought, including modernisation theory. This possibility shall now be explored. I will first review the evidence, this time restricting myself to Japan since that is the only East Asian country Eisenstadt has dealt with at some length and then ask whether that evidence can carry the notion of a unique modernity.

Empirically, Eisenstadt illustrates his case with various examples. The first example 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 instigating 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

24 See Tables 5 and 6 in the Appendix for partial validation of this claim using select South Asian, Latin American and sub-Saharan cases for purposes of illustration. The tables integrate the HDI data with those on political and economic performance (as presented in Tables 2 and 3). Due to space restrictions, they contain no data on educational and scientific performance, but where such data exist, they confirm the overall picture.
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 distinctiveness, but none of a substantially different nature. Assuming his account is factually correct (in the sense of adequately mirroring Japanese realities), is the evidence he cites significant enough to warrant conceptualisation as a unique modernity, one that differs ‘fundamentally’ from Western modernity? That depends on the conception of modernity employed. Viewing them through the lenses of modernisation theory, Eisenstadt’s observations reflect only minor variations of a basic structure of society that Japan, like other East Asian modernisers, shares with the West, making them rather insignificant. How about Eisenstadt’s own theory, then? Does this theory render them more meaningful?

Answering this question is more difficult than one might think. For, as even sympathetic observers have had occasion to note (see Allardt, 2005), Eisenstadt’s

25 The locus classicus for this observation is Johnson (1982). However, when claiming bureaucratic control of a country’s governance marks a significant difference from ‘the’ West, much depends on the entities compared with Japan. Reading between the lines of Eisenstadt’s account, one cannot help suspecting that he often ‘really’ means the United States when speaking of the ‘West’. If, however, we included countries like Germany, France and Italy, then the differences would seem less profound. In Germany, the ministerial bureaucracy enjoys considerable political leeway, with parliament (and to a certain extent also the cabinet) sometimes reduced to little more than ratifying agents. This applies especially to less controversial issues that form the basis of much everyday politics, but it can also hold for big issues such as choosing the right policies for containing the consequences of the meltdown of financial markets in 2008, which required a great deal of technical expertise that ordinary politicians simply do not have (a former minister of economics who stepped down after four years in office recently admitted that he had no clue about his responsibilities when first appointed; Spiegel Online, 19 February 2011). And even in the US, the federal government bureaucracy has so little trust in the competence of career politicians that it regularly shields decisions considered to be truly important against unwanted interference from those who are formally in charge, including the president (see Stiglitz, 2002:171). How different is Japan, then? At what level of the political system? And what difference do the respective differences make in terms of the outcomes of political processes (policies)? Questions such as these can only be answered through thorough empirical analysis. Multiple modernists have yet to deliver.

26 Given that Eisenstadt knows that modernisation theory’s claims are restricted to this subject matter, he might arguably arrive at the same conclusion. Summarising modernisation theoretical scholarship in the 1970s, he says it ‘stressed that the more modern or developed different societies become, the more similar they will become in their basic, central, institutional aspects’ (Eisenstadt, 1977:1; emphasis added). What Eisenstadt fails to show after his cultural turn is that Japan differs fundamentally from Western countries in these basic aspects.
does not really propound a sufficiently worked-out theory of modernity, and whatever theory he draws upon remains mostly implicit rather than being systematically explicated in his writings. Reading them carefully, a vague conceptualisation is nevertheless discernable. In line with what was indicated in the introduction, Eisenstadt pleads for a cultural conceptualisation of modernity, one that is concerned about showing how ‘a multiplicity of cultural programs’ rooted in the so-called axial civilisations gives rise to ‘multiple institutional and ideological patterns’ (Eisenstadt, 2000a:2). As the common core underlying this multiplicity he identifies ‘a mode or modes of interpretation of the world’ (Eisenstadt, 2005:31) that, by radicalising the reflexivity which first crystallised in the axial age, question(s) the givenness of social and political orders, thus raising awareness of their malleability and undermining traditional forms of legitimation. Structurally, Eisenstadt’s conceptualisation focuses on the nation-state and, combining this focus with the observation that nation states have different political systems with different socio-historical legacies, one gets the notion of multiple modernities. Multiple modernities stands for ‘unique expressions of modernity’ (Eisenstadt, 2000a:2), for the idea that globally shared ‘scripts’ of modernisation (Meyer et al., 1997) are thoroughly indigenised when locally ‘enacted’.

Thus understood, every case, and so by implication also Japan’s case, is of course a special case — hence unique almost by definition. One may still wonder what makes the differences between Japan and the West as ‘fundamental’ as Eisenstadt says they are, but once we accept the maxim, to quote Wolfgang Streeck’s phrasing, that ‘each social configuration is a “historical individual” that must ultimately be understood in its own terms’ (Streeck, 2001:5), this question becomes relatively unimportant. All that matters is that some difference be detected and that is easy because no two units of social analysis are exactly alike.

Eisenstadt might object to this interpretation and still insist on the profoundness of the differences between Japanese (or East Asian) and Western modernity, but on what basis? If reflexivity on the part of political elites is all that it takes to be modern, then the whole world is equally modern now, vast differences in the structuring of society, in levels of development, in institutional performance, in cultural continuity/change notwithstanding. And if differences such as these do not matter in analyses of modernity, then other

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27 Eisenstadt’s analysis of culture clearly focuses on high and elite culture (see also Joas and Knöbl, 2004:461, who like Allardt sympathise with his approach); the everyday culture of the ‘masses’ is largely absent from his analyses. To the extent that non-elite groups figure at all in these analyses, they appear mainly in the form of social movements.

28 For critical discussions of this aspect, see Schmidt (2007, 2010).
differences automatically gain weight. However, not just any differences will do to justify the notion of multiple modernities. To play the role Eisenstadt assigns them, the respective differences must be fundamental, for if they were not, the very rationale for pluralising the concept of modernity would collapse. Yet, Eisenstadt nowhere provides criteria for determining the relative weight of different types of difference or, to put it more generally, for determining the theoretic significance of observable phenomena. Instead, he simply asserts that some differences are fundamental. Fundamental in what sense, by what standards, and compared to what? Eisenstadt does not answer any of these questions and he cannot answer them because his theory of modernity (if one wants to call it that) is far too vague to generate meaningful answers.

A related problem with this theory concerns the boundaries demarcating different modernities. If we have reason to believe there is more than one modernity, then we obviously want to know how many of them there are and how we can tell them apart. Eisenstadt oscillates between two options. The first, rooted in some version of methodological nationalism, equates societies with nation states, with each society constituting a separate modernity. However, if all that Eisenstadt wants to say is that countries differ from each other in certain (more or less important) respects and if it is already established that they do not differ in their modernness, then why use the language of modernity in the first place? What analytic gain is to be derived from an academic exercise that elevates known nation states to obscure modernities? The writings of Eisenstadt and other culturalists provide no answer to this question. The second option is to aggregate groups of countries to larger, civilisation-based categories, such as Western modernity, East Asian (or Confucian) modernity, Arabic modernity, etc. This option might enrich our conceptualisations of modernity with a dose of culture, but faces the problem that it assumes both greater intra-civilisational homogeneity and inter-civilisational heterogeneity than seems to be empirically verifiable (Tiryakian, 2007) — which is precisely

29 Critics of theories claiming a convergence of societal structures, while acknowledging similarities at this level, sometimes question their importance, calling the respective commonalities superficial and speaking of façades of convergence that conceal cultural differences which they say are more powerful determinants of social reality (see, for example, Tai, 1989). Their addresses rebut by deeming the differences cited by culturalists to substantiate their case as irrelevant ('These are precisely the things that in the modern system do not matter'; see Meyer, 2000:245) and referring to them as instances of façade diversity (Boli and Elliot, 2008). To overcome this impasse, one needs a theory that assigns differential weights to different phenomena. Modernisation theory is a theory from which such weights, however controversially, can be derived. In the case of Eisenstadt’s theory, that is not possible. So one simply has to believe the phenomena he highlights (for reasons that remain largely unexplained) are important because he says so.
the reason why some multiple modernists, including Eisenstadt himself, are somewhat uneasy about it and repeatedly resort to methodological nationalism (see, for example, Wittrock, 2000).

Yet another possibility arises if we take seriously the stipulation that only fundamental differences qualify a social system for designation as a separate modernity. For to find fundamental differences, however we define them, one need not always cross national or civilisational boundaries. In India, for instance, enormous differences in virtually all aspects of social life exist not only between urban and rural areas, but also at the state and district levels (see, for example, Drèze and Sen, 2002) — differences that are arguably much bigger than those between, say, Denmark and Sweden on the one hand, and Shanghai and New York on the other.30 Following this consideration would help overcome some of the limitations and problems associated with the first two options, but result in uncontrolled inflation of modernities, rendering the concept practically useless.

In short, the multiple modernities paradigm does allow us to treat Japanese (or East Asian) modernity as unique, but only at the price of considerable confusion and of trivialisation of the concept of modernity itself. Classical sociology devised this concept to make sense of the huge transformations that were ushered in by a series of revolutions (the commercial revolution, the scientific revolution, the industrial revolution, the political revolution, the educational revolution, etc.) that, beginning roughly around the 15th century, first shook Europe and then the world. A paradigm that dates modernity’s origins back to the epistemological transformations of the axial age some 2,500 years ago (i.e., to the breakthrough of reflexivity) is bound to downplay

30 In a special issue of the journal Thesis Eleven (2004, no. 77), all Scandinavian countries are treated as separate modernities.

31 One issue that is repeatedly invoked in support of a multiple modernities perspective is that of contextually varying experiences of modernity. As I see it, this issue has two dimensions. Firstly, we have to ask whose experience we actually mean. Multiple modernists tend to focus on the experience of intellectuals, i.e., of tiny minorities that often cultivate rather peculiar sentiments and whose experience is rarely, if ever, representative of the population in general. Secondly, we have to specify the units of analysis we compare, as well as the time horizon we employ. Thus, if we compare the everyday experience of two engineers living in, say, present day Rome and Tokyo, then my guess would be that these two people’s experience may indeed have more in common with each other than that of each of them with their respective ancestors’ experience living in 15th century Italy or Japan (for an instructive discussion of Japan’s premodern conditions, see Ferris, 2009). It would also not surprise me if a computer programmer living in contemporary Mumbai had more in common with the above urbanites than with a Dalit peasant living in contemporary Bihar. Ultimately, this is an empirical question and the answer will depend a lot on how the notion of experience is operationalised. So far, multiple modernists have shown little interest in producing the kind of evidence needed for purposes of empirical verification.
the impact of these structural transformations (i.e., the breakthrough of an entirely new societal formation).\(^{32}\) Ironically, in so doing, it also trivialises a sense in which Japan and East Asia are truly unique, namely that to the present date no other non-Western location has travelled the road to modernity farther than (rapidly growing parts of) this region. Eisenstadt is of course aware of East Asia’s level of development — which is, in fact, the reason he cites for contrasting Western and Japanese modernity. But a purely culturalist conceptualisation of modernity lacks the conceptual means needed to appraise the significance of a transformation whose scope and pace are historically unprecedented. For modernisation, as modernisation theorists knew all too well, is a multi-dimensional process that affects all spheres of life and hence cannot be reduced to cultural aspects alone.

V

How do we proceed from here? To prevent misunderstandings, I should perhaps begin with a disclaimer. The aim of the present article is not to vindicate modernisation theory in its classical form. Like any theory, modernisation theory has its weaknesses and needs to be revised in light of valid criticisms if it is to be upheld as a useful approach for studying global social change. Nor is it my intention to question the instructiveness of social scientific approaches focusing on cultural phenomena and their impact. Quite the contrary. The pertinent research, including the research inspired by the multiple modernities school, has doubtless generated useful insights. The main shortcoming of this particular school, as I see it, is that it overstates the epistemological status of its findings by failing to determine their weight for different reference problems, i.e., for a theory of modernity as against other research questions for which they might be more relevant.

Analyses of modernity target relatively high levels of abstraction, because modernity is a condition that, while initially confined to ‘the’ West, has now spread across the whole world, albeit with different levels of operational penetration in different locations. Given the world’s cultural and socio-historical

[^32]: A particularly telling example is Wagner’s (2008:vii) treatment of Greek antiquity as ‘an early manifestation of modernity’. If we follow this categorisation of ancient Greece, then the changes brought about by the above revolutions cannot really have been very fundamental, certainly not as profound as claimed by classical sociology and modernisation theory. So who is right? While answering this question is beyond the scope of the present article, it is perhaps worth noting that Wagner’s analysis consists mainly of discourse analysis (modernity is what European and non-European scholars say it is), whereas authors subscribing to the other view identify modernity primarily with certain social structural and institutional characteristics.
diversity, this condition is bound to express itself in multiple forms. The task of a theory of society, however, is to uncover ‘the regularities underlying the variety’, as Daniel Lerner aptly puts it (1958:78). If we want to know what is peculiar to modernity, then we need to focus on these regularities. Whether past efforts at conceptualising modernity’s central features have succeeded is debatable.\footnote{Graubard (2000:v), in his preface to the Daedalus issue on multiple modernities, argues that authors subscribing to a multiple modernities perspective question whether traits described as modern in ‘prevailing’ theories ‘do in fact accurately and fully render the complexity of the modern world’. If by rendering this complexity Graubard means representing it, then his statement reflects little more than a misunderstanding of the purpose and function of a theory. To do their job, theories must simplify, must abstract from some of the world’s complexity, must keep a distance and adopt a bird’s eye, rather than a frog’s eye perspective so they can render visible the structures generating, organising, shaping this complexity. They should of course offer conceptual space and analytic tools for capturing it (which modernisation theory clearly does; see Schmidt, 2010), but they would not be theories if they did not look behind the ‘thickness’ (Geertz, 1973) of appearances described in ethnographic or historical accounts (for a discussion of some of the problems this entails, see, for example, Luhmann, 1994).} But regardless of how one thinks about this, it makes no sense to confront that work with findings addressing completely different reference problems.

The findings of multiple modernists are a case in point. They certainly contribute to our understanding of how contextual parameters shape the construction, functioning and local ‘colouring’ of institutions, and if it can be shown that this occurs in a coherent manner across institutional realms — not just in the polity, but also in the economy, in law, in the educational and scientific systems, etc. — then we might ponder conceptualising them in terms of a ‘varieties of modernity’ approach (Schmidt, 2006). But the varieties that such an approach might capture would still be sub-categories of a common, shared modernity, allowing us to distinguish them both from their ‘peers’ and from pre-modern or less modern social systems.\footnote{Eisenstadt (2000a:3) admits as much: ‘In acknowledging a multiplicity of continually evolving modernities,’ he writes, ‘one confronts the problem of just what constitutes the common core of modernity.’ As this core, he identifies the ‘modes of interpretation of the world’ (Eisenstadt, 2005:31) already alluded to. As demonstrated by the work of Inglehart and others, modernisation theorists would not object to a conceptualisation of modernity that includes cultural aspects. They would, however, reject a purely culturalist conceptualisation as too narrow.} Moreover, knowledge about these varieties would not compete with the more abstract propositions of general theories of modernity, which it could, nonetheless, flesh out to a certain extent.

Of course, a varieties of modernity approach would face the same problems of boundary drawing as the multiple modernities approach, and this problem alone should be formidable enough to discourage more than occasional experimentation with it, as indicated by the varieties of capitalism literature (see, for
example, Hall and Soskice, 2001; Streeck and Yamamura, 2001) that, while shedding light on important differences between the political economies of a few leading countries, falls far short of covering the whole world of modern capitalism.\footnote{Becker (2009) is a partial exception as the author, while still focusing on North America and Western Europe, makes a conscious effort to address this problem and to review some of the pertinent literature on other world regions. Interestingly, his own conceptualisation and findings, like those of virtually all other advocates of the varieties of capitalism approach covering at least some parts of East Asia (Japan; Japan and the four tigers; or Japan plus South Korea and Taiwan), undermine the juxtaposition of East Asia and ‘the’ West by dissolving the West into a variety of discrete categories some of which are more different from each other than from their East Asian counterparts. Empirical studies of global value change do the same in the cultural field, consistently exhibiting greater differences within the West than between select Western and East Asian countries (see the very telling figures in Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, ch. 2).} An alternative avoiding these difficulties, yet addressing the substantive concerns of the multiple modernities school, would consist in cross-country comparisons of the ways in which local culture ‘impregnates’ modern institutions in different nation-states. Münch’s (1986) work provides a useful model. This work is quite informative but, since the author is a highly proficient social theorist, he does not even pretend to substitute structural theories of modernity. Instead, Münch merely aims to complement them, as indeed he should, thus tempering his ambitions to what he can actually deliver. Multiple modernists might benefit from considering this alternative.

References


## Table 5: Select South Asian and Latin American countries

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<th>Country</th>
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<th>GDP</th>
<th>LE</th>
<th>Literacy</th>
<th>Freedom/democracy</th>
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<th>World Economic Forum</th>
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Sources: UNDP: Human Development Report, 2009