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## Does modernity still matter? Evaluating the concept of multiple modernities and its alternatives

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# **DOES MODERNITY STILL MATTER? EVALUATING THE CONCEPT OF MULTIPLE MODERNITIES AND ITS ALTERNATIVES**

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*Elsje Fourie, University of Trento*

**Bath Papers in International Development no. 10**

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Series Editor: Graham K. Brown

Website: <http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/bpd>

Email: [bpd-editor@bath.ac.uk](mailto:bpd-editor@bath.ac.uk)



The Centre for Development Studies  
University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY  
<http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/>





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Elsje Fourie

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# Does modernity still matter? Evaluating the concept of multiple modernities and its alternatives

Elsje Fourie

## Abstract

In recent years, the concept of *multiple modernities* has emerged to challenge the perceived Eurocentrism and unilinearity of traditional theories of convergence, and has led to renewed efforts to appreciate differing trajectories of contemporary political and social development. Its exponents' key argument—that forms of modernity are so varied and so contingent on culture and historical circumstance that the term itself must be spoken of in the plural—is particularly pertinent in an era where prevailing 'Western' models of development are becoming less influential.

This paper seeks to provide an examination of the main principles of this approach, a synthesis of its evolution and an analysis of its strengths and shortcomings. It examines the application of the theory to the case of Indian modernity, before addressing several alternative approaches that have attempted to fill similar gaps in the literature. It concludes with some thoughts on the future and feasibility of the study of modernity itself.

The paper finds that multiple modernities has been useful in widening the scope of study, and that it focuses on important questions that its rivals have not yet addressed. However, it has not yet adequately identified the 'core' of modernity itself, nor has it refuted the charge of cultural essentialism. For modernity to retain utility as a concept, it must ultimately be viewed as a single, coherent force, albeit one which is continually contested and reversible, and which has vastly differing impacts on different societies. By addressing the ways in which this force is creatively adapted and its manifestations socially constructed, multiple modernities will be able to better identify the many ways in which societies can be modern today.

## Corresponding Author

Elsje Fourie  
School of International Studies  
University of Trento  
Via Verdi 8/10  
Trento, TN  
I-38122, Italy

Email: [elsje.fourie@sis.unitn.it](mailto:elsje.fourie@sis.unitn.it)

## 1 Introduction

*Some, of course, question the value of the very idea of modernity, but the word is all around us, and it may already be too late to legislate its uses. The rhetoric itself may be taken as a sign that, in spite of our contemporary intellectual incredulity toward them, historicist or stageist ideas of history and modernity are never far from our thoughts. We must, therefore, engage and reengage our ideas about modernity in a spirit of constant vigilance*

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002: xx)

Although the gap between academic and popular discourse is often wide, in the case of certain concepts this gap can become a chasm. One such unfortunate term is *modernity*: it has been unfashionable in the social sciences—and especially in its parent discipline of sociology—for some time now, and has been disowned and deconstructed to the extent that no formal discussion of it seems complete without a distancing of author to subject. Yet switch on a television, open a newspaper or stroll through any city and one is likely to encounter the term or its variants; clearly, ‘modernity is in the streets more than ever’ (Kaya 2004: 47), and so continues to shape our understanding of the world around us.

The past decade has seen the emergence of several academic alternatives attempting to reconcile the criticisms of modernity with its continued utility, and thereby bridge this divide. One of the most influential of these, the theory of multiple modernities, has argued that modernity continues to have an undeniable global impact, but that this impact is so radically mediated by the historical and cultural backgrounds of each society it encounters that it makes more sense to speak of the concept in the plural.

This paper examines the theory of multiple modernities and its central assumptions and *problematic*s, before critically assessing its strengths and shortcomings. Multiple modernities has undoubtedly attracted valuable debate, but has not yet made the inroads into scholarly or public debates that its proponents have hoped for. The paper explores why this is the case, before looking at how the theory has been applied to a real-world case of non-Western ‘modernity’, namely that of India. In doing so, I examine some alternatives that have attempted to fill similar gaps in the literature, before concluding with some thoughts on the future and feasibility of the study of modernity.

## 2 Multiple modernities: Assumptions and central questions

### 2.1 Starting points

Multiple modernities theory, being of recent origin and placing an emphasis on diversity, is neither fully developed in form nor homogenous in content. The term was coined in the late 1990s by sociologist Schmuël Eisenstadt, who in many ways has been the architect of the theory. Two additional important early scholars, Johann Arnason and Bjorn Wittrock, have been joined by a range of theorists with a variety of interpretations, many from societies in which modernity is said to diverge from the traditional ‘norm’.

And, indeed, if there is one starting point on which advocates of multiple modernities converge, despite their differences, it is a rejection of the traditional theories of modernisation. These are criticised for two fundamental teleological assumptions, namely that modernity is a single, unified homogenising process, and that the West is the yardstick by which success is measured (Kaviraj 2005, Eisenstadt 2005). The convergence theories of Talcott Parsons and others, influential during the 1950s and 1960s, come under particular attack for assuming that structural differentiation and the growth of institutions such as liberal democracy, the free market and the bureaucratic state are inevitable in 'modernising' societies throughout the world and will naturally be accompanied by individualism, a secular-rational world view and other cultural dimensions. For Parsons (1966), societies have little choice but to follow a unilinear path from the primitive to the modern, and it is this view of modernity 'as a uniform, unambiguously structured pattern in progress towards harmonious integration' (Kaya 2004: 36) to which multiple modernity theorists take particular exception.

Most multiple modernity theorists are also highly sceptical of the classical modernisation theories of Weber, Hegel, Marx and Habermas, reading them as parochial and focused on the impact of single cultural or institutional factors (Tu 2005: 198). A few accounts (Eisenstadt *et al* 2002) have a more nuanced reading and see in the earliest literature an awareness of both the liberating and destructive elements of modernity, but most object to what they see as a determinism and exceptionalism that fail to provide an accurate picture of global processes. Similarly, although there is some recognition that these traditional accounts have become contested since the 1970s and 1980s, multiple modernity theorists argue that a new set of totalising theories have emerged since the end of the Cold War. Many write of the need for a third way between Fukuyama's (1992) 'end of history' thesis (the logical endpoint of homogenisation) and Huntington's (1996) 'clash of civilizations' thesis (which views modernity as uniquely Western) (Eisenstadt *et al* 2002: 2).

In place of these theories, then, the theory of multiple modernities argues that all modernisation should be seen in the light of its historical context. Because the impact of modernity around the world is and always has been highly contingent on the cultural backgrounds of individual societies, its ideological and institutional manifestations are bound to vary greatly. According to Eisenstadt (2005: 2), modernity is a process of 'continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programmes', whereas Kaviraj (2005: 138) likens modernisation to the process of learning a new language but retaining one's original accent and thought patterns.

A further central tenet and starting point for the theory is the fact that modernity has been 'multiple' from its beginnings, and that, until very recently, large parts of Europe could scarcely be called modern themselves. Throughout the past two centuries, Western economies, political systems and societies have been organised in very different ways, with the role of the state in Europe and the United States being only one example (Wittrock 2005: 33). Europe, as a whole, has never been economically modern and has only very recently become politically modern, if these concepts are taken to be synonymous with the liberal market economy and nation-state/constitutional republic respectively. Throughout its expansion, modernity has been heavily contested in Europe—the Vienna Congress and Holy Alliance were nothing if not comprehensive attempts to "make Europe safe for tradition" (Wittrock 2005: 47). At other times, competing visions of modernity in Europe came destructively to blows, as during World War II. As modernity transformed (and was transformed by) Europe, its various incarnations

were exported to the spheres of influence of each 'modern' power, with the result that India came into contact with a completely different set of values and institutions than did South America (Mazlish 2001: 71). The results were far too complex and multidimensional, hold the advocates of multiple modernities, to be described simply as 'Westernisation'.

Multiple modernities, in locating the spatial beginnings of modernity, thus accords the European experience an important, albeit not homogenous or hegemonic, position. As regards modernity's temporal evolution, there seems to be general agreement that the late 18<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the deep-seated epistemic transformations and interconnected cultural transformations necessary for observers to speak of a new age (Wittrock 2005: 41). The roots may lie deeper, specifically in the urban, feudal, intellectual and papal revolutions of the 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, or the Enlightenment, but it was only really with the American war of secession, Industrial revolution and French revolution, advocates argue, that modernity began to emerge as a cultural and political programme. Although the key features of this programme will be discussed shortly, it is important to note here that these radical new changes are not held to be merely intensifications of trends that had come before, but an abandonment of universal Enlightenment values and discourses "in favour of forms of representation and endowment of rights based on territoriality or membership in a linguistically and historically constituted and constructed community" (Wittrock 2005: 45).

## 2.2 The *problematiques* of multiple modernities

The past two centuries, thus, have been fundamentally different in some way, but how? In attempting to answer this question, the theory of multiple modernities contains within it three additional closely related questions or themes. The first concerns the antimonies of differentiation and integration. Modernity has always had at its heart a tension between the legitimacy of individual interests, on the one hand, and totalising ideologies, on the other (Eisenstadt 2005: 8). Because modernity fosters competing visions of the public good, it contains within it the seeds of its own continual destruction and reconstruction. Multiple modernity theorists thus argue that the multiplicity of political and societal forms today are merely a continuation of this process and occur *within*, rather than outside, modernity itself.

A second question leads on from this, and asks whether modernity is a substantive set of processes and phenomena, or merely temporal. Can we speak of modern societies (and thus necessarily of 'non-modern' societies) or is it enough to say that we live in an epoch where modernity has become a common global condition? Multiple modernity theorists, on the whole, tend towards the latter conclusion: to Wittrock (2005: 38), our age is marked by the fact that modernity now forms a reference point around which even its self-professed opponents must construct their opposition and identities. These theorists thus view the ascendancy of challenges to liberalism not—as some would—as the beginning of a postmodern condition, but as the continual reinterpretation and contestation of a concept whose demise many have been too quick to herald.

Some of the literature takes this open-ended notion of modernity to considerable lengths, viewing it 'as a loosely-structured constellation, open to modification and redefinitions' (Arnason 2002: 132). Some proponents argue that attaching a definition to modernity will render it a closed monolith and that it is thus 'neither necessary nor possible to work outside modernity'

(Kaya 2004: 45). The extent to which certain societies are 'modern' or 'not modern' is considered less important than the doing away with such binary oppositions altogether.

However, several other exponents of the theory have remarked on the potential erosion and loss of meaning that such an amorphous approach can entail (Gole 2005: 91) and have attempted to define the core—and thereby also the limits—of modernity. This core is never institutional or organisational, but situated at the far more abstract level of ontological and cultural orientations. This, ideally, allows multiple modernities to explain the evolution of political and economic forms around a number of fixed principles.

The most important of these principles is a conception of human agency that was radically new at the time that it developed two centuries ago—a conception of humans as autonomous and able to exercise control over their environment through rational mastery and conscious activity (Eisenstadt 2005). Societies hitherto embedded in a worldview ordained by God were freed to reevaluate the foundations on which they operated, and to construct new institutions accordingly.

This critical notion of mastery of self, society and nature had numerous consequences. New forms of popular participation were born, and the relationship between the centre and periphery were inexorably redefined. The identities of the individual moved beyond the fixed, the local and the narrow and began to take on universal significance (Lerner and Inkeles quoted in Eisenstadt 2005: 4). The vision of political and public space was transformed, and with it the very relationship between the polity, society and civil society.

To Wittrock (2005: 137), modernity offered and continues to offer a specific set of what he terms 'promissory notes', namely the standards that macrosocietal institutions are held up to, at least in principle. Every society articulates promissory notes, which are publicly expressed, realisable, and, in acting as points of departure for proposals and counterproposals, form "generalised reference points" for that society. What makes the promissory notes of modernity unique seems to be the new forms of political organisation they advocate, as well as the controversy and revolutionary upheaval around which they centre (Wittrock 2005: 42).

This potential for revolutionary upheaval is crucial. Many authors emphasise the utopian and even eschatological or Jacobin visions which seem to play such an important role in modern political and cultural programmes (for example Eisenstadt 2001). Because modernity is, in one sense, so totalising and irreversible, themes of protest and the complete reinvention of society feature strongly. Conflict and struggle is inherent in modernity, be it conflict between multiple cultural orientations (Arnason 2002: 133) or between competing visions of the collective good within a polity. This renders modernity, and modernising societies, highly reflexive, self-questioning and self-conscious. In a sense, modernity places agents outside of their time and place, bringing about an unprecedented historical consciousness.

### **2.3 Contributions and challenges:**

Multiple modernities shares much of the above definition with other contemporary sociological scholarship. Modernity's emphasis on autonomy and agency (Wagner 2008a, Chakrabarty 2002: 46) as well as its revolutionary potential and reflexivity (see particularly Kolakowski's (1990) famous characterisation of modernity as being 'on endless trial') are not unique to the theory.

However, the contribution of the multiple modernities theory lies in the thesis that cultural and historical backgrounds lead different civilisations to have sufficiently different interpretations of these core features so as to result in various 'modernities'. Something fundamental clearly separates us from our pre-modern ancestors, it remarks, and yet the spread of institutions has been so uneven that the change must lie elsewhere. Cultural orientations are embodied in institutions, but are not reducible to them (Arnason 2005: 65). Multiple modernities is thus a uniquely cultural theory of modernity (while still firmly situated in the social sciences). Coinciding with the so-called "cultural turn" witnessed by the discipline in the 1990s, its proponents have argued strongly against a perceived neglect of cross-cultural and comparative-historical analysis.

One of the most controversial aspects of multiple modernities has been its focus on civilisational analysis. This ontological bias towards civilisations (in the plural) is borne partially out of the need to combat the view of Civilisation (capitalised and in the singular) which was once so prominent in discussions on progress, and partially due to the view of modernity as a conscious political and cultural project.

Whatever the weaknesses of such an approach (and these will be discussed shortly), it opens the way for two further contributions. Firstly, being site-based, it allows for the examination of several highly topical cases. China, and East Asia more generally, come under particularly intense scrutiny, sometimes as instances of 'Confucian modernity' (Tu 2005, Wakeman 2001). In a region where elites have been struggling for more than a century to formulate their responses and construct their own identity in reference to modernity, the tensions between supposedly value-neutral modern imports such as technology and the cultural heart that elites have sought to preserve have been profound (Wakeman 2001). Islamic, Communist, American—and, as we shall see in a moment, Indian—modernities are similarly analysed.

In addition, a cultural focus has allowed for the examination of the complex interplay between the "modern" and the "traditional" in the creation of cultural identities globally. Elites and intellectuals have been able to participate actively in some of the practices of modernity whilst actively rejecting others. As Eisenstadt (2005: 14) puts it, it has been 'possible for these groups to incorporate some of the Western universalistic elements of modernity in the construction of their own new collective identities, without necessarily giving up specific components of their traditional identities'. For many around the world, modernity has been double-edged, containing within itself both the hope of freedom and material benefit, but also the loss of identity. This 'ambivalence of universalising visions' (Sachsenmaier 2001: 45), this threat of destruction and promise of emancipation can only be theorised by a conception of modernity and culture that sees the two as intertwined rather than in continual opposition.

Criticisms of traditional modernity theory have been numerous in recent decades. However, they have tended to take either the form of postmodern accounts of disillusionment from the West or, as one author points out (Sachsenmaier 2001: 60), have been articulated within specific national contexts (such as that of Turkey) which have portrayed themselves as the sole hold-outs in a modernised, homogenised world and nation. Multiple modernities must thus be given considerable credit for taking the first step towards constructing a comprehensive cultural critique of modernity theory while simultaneously acknowledging the continued importance of the concept itself.

However, a number of criticisms can, in turn, be levelled against the theory of multiple modernities itself. Firstly, it tends to misrepresent—or at the very least engage insufficiently with—its predecessors and contemporaries. Particularly those authors who condemn all prior modernisation theory as panglossian or unilinear forget, for example, Weber's Iron Cage of bureaucratic control and economic compulsion, or the irony in his remark that 'in Western civilisation and in Western civilisation only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (*as we like to think*), lie in a line of development having universal significance and value' (Weber 1920/2002: 13—my emphasis). Even the convergence theory of Parsons and others does not claim that all difference between (or within) cultures will disappear and that countries will become exact replicas of the United States, as multiple modernities' most insistent critic has pointed out (Schmidt 2008: 4).

Similarly, there is little meaningful engagement or refutation of postmodernism, yet any theorist which claims that scholars have only very recently 'begun to pose serious questions about "Eurocentric" theories of modernity' (Kaya 2004: 36) must first explain why the questions of postmodernism (or, for that matter, Islamic fundamentalism) are not considered to have at least started the ball rolling.

By dismissing all prior discussions of modernity as Western in nature, multiple modernities does a disservice to the rich and varied tradition that has existed for decades in the developing world, in fields such as subaltern studies (for example, Chakrabarty 2002)<sup>1</sup>. Multiple modernities remains unique in its project to move beyond these criticisms into a more coherent theoretical whole, yet it would do well to take them into greater consideration.

Secondly, the theory exhibits serious ontological confusion at times, especially in its inconsistency regarding units of analysis. At times, each civilisation is seen to have its own variant of modernity, while elsewhere the state or religion are seen as providing the major dividing lines between 'modernities'. For Eisenstadt (2005: 4), for example, 'cultural entities' such as China, Japan or Western Europe are characterised by certain 'core identities' stemming from earlier periods of 'cultural crystallisation', yet neither of these potentially problematic concepts are explained. If European modernity was as diverse from its birth as the theorists of multiple modernities claim, can it be possible to speak of a single Confucian modernity? It also remains unclear why modernity itself is open to constant revision and fragmentation, yet the societies it comes into contact with are not. After all, if modernity is above all a force of dynamism and agency, then it would be contradictory to imagine that it can so easily be shaped and reified by culture (Wagner 2008a: 3).

This brings us back to the heart of the problem the theory faces, and the intellectual tightrope it will have to walk if it is to achieve lasting explanatory and predictive power. On the one hand, multiple modernities is attempting to deconstruct established notions of the 'modern' in order to explain the plurality of socio-political forms around the world. On the other, it realises that it is not enough to simply posit infinite, meaningless variation and therefore reverts to exactly the casual cultural generalisations it is hoping to avoid. In so doing, it lays itself open, on the one extreme, to charges of essentialism, cultural determination and ahistoricism (as articulated, for example, in Wagner 2008a: 3, Des Forges 2002: 672), while, on the other, it can be accused of

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<sup>1</sup>Ashis Nandy's "critical traditionalism", discussed at length in Chakrabarty, is only one example of the theorising that multiple modernities claims has been lacking until recently.

stretching the boundaries of modernity so far that they begin to collapse. Multiple modernities theory must be careful to avoid charges that 'it only distances itself from what it takes to be the most objectionable views of modernisation theory without offering an alternative definition' (Schmidt 2006: 78).

One particular case—that of Islamic fundamentalism—demonstrates this latter danger particularly well. Multiple modernities theory holds that autonomy and rational mastery are central to modernity, but that different societies can interpret both of those concepts in radically different ways. For this reason, it argues that these contemporary religious fundamentalist movements are themselves modern and are essential in bringing about a uniquely 'Islamic modernity'. Theorists acknowledge that 'Islamism rejects the dominant features of modernity' (Gole 2005: 93), and that anti-modern symbolism and a yearning for a mythical past set it at odds with certain aspects of the concept. However, at the same time, they argue that because this past is imagined and selectively interpreted, and because a radical break with *recent* history is advocated, Islamism is, paradoxically, only seemingly anti-modern. In fact, they hold, its view of the state as sovereign and territorial, and its desire to purify a corrupt society, makes it a very modern movement (Kaldor 2003: 2). Religion, too, is reappropriated and subject to constant revision and reflexivity. In this way, Islamism introduces Muslim agency into the modern arena and enables Muslims to participate collectively and critically in the modern age. Participation in Islamist movements, some allege, even allows women to redraw the boundaries of traditional gender roles and obtain visibility in public life, bringing about what Gole (2005) calls 'the forbidden modern'.

Much of this is certainly true: Islamic fundamentalism is possible only in a modern age, as these groups' obsession with modernity makes clear. It is also true that much of this supposed denial of modernity is selective, and that Islamism's interactions with modernity are more sophisticated and open to mutual co-option than meets the eye. However, totalistic, essentialist movements have existed before modernity, and, I would argue, are likely to outlive it. It would seem that a modern ideology must not only be self-reflexive, but must have at its heart the human autonomy and rationality mentioned previously. As such, it is doubtful that a religious movement which has as its primary aim the ultimate surrender of this agency to some higher, transcendental authority can be inherently modern unless the concept is to lose some of its meaning. In addition, an ideology that seeks to return to the past (even in an imagined, unrecognisable form), is as much reactionary as it is revolutionary. Islamic fundamentalism may thus be best understood as a critique of modernity. Rather than speaking of modernities defined by Islamic (or Hindu or Christian) fundamentalism, it is perhaps preferable to speak rather of religious fundamentalist *responses* to modernity in societies where the two forces are continually engaged in a complex, multidirectional interplay.

The question of whether this autonomy can be collective as well as individual is a more difficult one, and one that Arnason (2005) and others have explored in discussions of communist modernity. Given the impact of Marxist thought on modern state-building and the mobilisation of entire societies to create a vision of the future where the traditional bonds on freedom are severed forever, the evidence that communism is not a rejection but instead a distinctive model of modernity is more conclusive here. In any case, the concepts of autonomy and rational mastery can be interpreted differently from society to society, but cannot be stretched indefinitely.



### 3 Indian and Hindu modernities: A case study

‘Indian modernity’ is another case in which these themes—as well as earlier questions of universality versus heterogeneity and of space versus time—come strikingly to the fore. The choice of title already demonstrates the difficulty inherent in determining when ‘cultural crystallisation’ has taken place and what its boundaries are. Unusually among the cases examined by the theory, two forms of competing modernities are analysed within the same geographical borders, although by no means neatly and without overlap.

On the one hand, the theory of multiple modernities at times analyses ‘Hindu civilisation’ (e.g. Eisenstadt 2001: 37) and its modern manifestations. These discussions often run along similar lines to the abovementioned discussions on Islamic modernity. Theorists note that groups such as the Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) respond to the porous nature of the modern world by presenting a reified, ahistorical vision of a Hindu culture under attack. The solution of these ‘regressive modernisers’ (Nanda 2003) to the pluralism engendered by modernity is the creation of a totalising *Hindutva* (‘Hinduness’) that can restore the civilisation to its former Golden Age. Hinduism, as a translocal cultural regime with the ability to unite mass publics, is thus viewed as inherently modern in content (Hefner 1998).

However, most analyses focus on the development of modernity within the boundaries of the modern state of India. As a state that echoes the political institutional arrangements present in much of the West and yet possesses an entirely unique political culture, the case of India makes for an intriguing examination into the exportability of the European experience.

Theorists do not always agree on the origins of Indian modernity, or the forms that it has taken. Shulman (2005), for example, believes that modernity in Southern India evolved organically from local culture, before sustained contact with the West and several centuries before the ‘modern age’. He uses as an example the 19<sup>th</sup> century Telugu poet Apparao, who wrote in a colloquial, individualised vernacular, touched on ‘modern’ themes of scepticism and utilitarianism, and who inspired social reformers with his focus on the injustices of child marriage. However, the aforementioned argument that the cultural developments that occurred during Europe from the 12<sup>th</sup> to mid-18<sup>th</sup> centuries did not, in themselves, fully constitute modernity, seems to this author both sound and applicable to this case.

More convincingly, most theorists of Indian modernity, particularly Schmucl Eisenstadt (2003) and Sidupta Kaviraj (2002), hold that the phenomenon grew out of encounters between traditional culture and colonialism.<sup>2</sup> The integral role of colonialism does not imply, however, that India’s path was like that of the West. Because both the initial conditions and the sequencing were so unique in India, the reflexivity inherent in modernity necessitates unique outcomes. As Kaviraj (2002: 140) points out, ‘under Indian conditions, when democracy is [already] an established political practice, it seriously affects the actual structure and historical path of capitalist development’. In addition, the British never truly attempted to replicate the

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<sup>2</sup> Discussions of Indian modernity are not, of course, limited to the literature on multiple modernities. As has been mentioned elsewhere, the approach would do well to take findings of subaltern and alternative modernities scholars (many of whom hail from the subcontinent) into greater account. The present analysis has focused, however, on those scholars who explicitly use the framework of “multiple modernities” to analyse the Indian case. Of these, Eisenstadt and Kaviraj stand out in particular.

European state in India, but were careful to exercise control over the political sphere alone and thereby retain the subsidiarity and plurality deeply rooted in traditional society (Kaviraj 2002).

This multiplicity is identified as the key element to have both preceded and defined Indian modernity. For Eisenstadt, India has, for centuries, broadly operated according to a complex system of 'fractured sovereignty', whereby a range of actors at different levels of society possessed a relatively high level of autonomy within their own spheres (Eisenstadt 2003: 790). Multiple centres of power linked by a complex set of networks were the norm, leading to adaptive and symbiotic modes of social relations. Orders such as the Brahman (priestly) and Kshatriya (military) each possessed different sources of legitimacy and different duties, yet at the same time were fluid and continuously open to renegotiation. Thus even the caste system lacked the rigidity and closed nature of many other traditional societies.

Although pluralism was important for the development of modernities in the West as it was in India, Eisenstadt argues that the former was marked by greater antagonism and ideological conflict. Church and State in Europe may have been fractured, for example, but each side desired ontological control (Eisenstadt 2003: 792). Each side often mooted unification (under the dominance of its own particular grouping) as an ideal.

A consequence of this difference is the relative lack of Jacobin tendencies in Indian modernity. According to Eisenstadt (2003: 632), Hinduism less often conceives of the political arena as a venue for salvation, and thus India has witnessed fewer attempts at completely reconstructing the political order to fit transcendental, totalising visions. In other words, 'the principled ideological dimension did not constitute a central component of the political process and struggle' (Eisenstadt 2003: 803). Meaningful change has occurred in India, but it has more often been the result of continual, intensive bargaining and power-sharing rather than of revolution.

Whether British rule intensified or merely mediated these tendencies, it does seem that modernity was by no means unilaterally imposed on an unwilling and unmodern populace. New and old elites responded by emulation and opposition respectively (Kaviraj 2002), and external forces were both creatively adapted and vigorously debated. Although the imposition of a unified state structure formalised and even rigidified social divisions, the British use of informal bargaining procedures and local bureaucrats ensured that the social sector remained relatively autonomous and divided along communal lines.

If Indian modernity has placed a greater emphasis on incremental transformation and diffusion of power than has its European counterpart, how has this manifested itself in practical terms—especially after colonialism? For one, it can explain how its democracy has endured in the face of widespread initial pessimism: by recognising the multi-faceted nature of Indian identity, the Indian National Congress was able to create a broadly secular yet heterogeneous nationalism that co-opted the opposition and blunted most polarising ideologies (Eisenstadt 2002). For Kaviraj (2002), democracy's reflexivity lends Indians collective agency and is therefore fundamentally modern; it also leads, however, to three local peculiarities: 1) the equality of groups within the political system is prioritised over the equality of individuals, 2) a relative lack of industrialisation makes rural agrarian groups an unusually powerful lobby, and 3) the continuing importance of religion means that a fundamental tension often exists between the demands of secularism and of political representativeness.

Eisenstadt also harbours doubts about the stability and resilience of the centrist consensus, especially since the Indira Gandhi years. The decay of political institutions, rise of regional nationalism and increase of divergent societal demands on a weakening centre may all bring about a more tumultuous modernity, but it may also reflect adaptation and greater power-sharing (Eisenstadt 2003). Another theorist is less ambivalent, positing that plural democracy itself is slowly eroding India's accommodating tendencies and marginalising minorities (Tambiah 2005). The religious nationalism of the BJP and its peers again emerges here as dangerously totalising.

In a sense, this brings us full circle to the opening discussion on Hindu versus Indian modernities. The literature on multiple modernities distinguishes between a transnational religious ideology that aims to reify and purify the past, and an indigenous set of traditions mediated by the colonial and post-colonial experiences of a modern state. One exemplifies modernity's Jacobin and centralising tendencies, the other its fragmenting and democratising nature. As they have been in frequent opposition to each other throughout the modern age, so they are too in contemporary Indian politics.

At the same time, both illustrate how far multiple modernities has yet to come in delineating the boundaries of this nebulous concept. If modernity signifies *human* agency, then—to repeat the question posed in the discussion on Islamic modernity—can modernity use religion as its rallying cry? If modernity is freedom, or at least the illusion of it, was pre-colonial India more modern than British India? And is the story of Indian modernity simply the story of Indian social and political development over the past three centuries, or is there some fundamental distinction?

Multiple modernities is highly effective in illustrating how modernity in India has been path-dependent and how the Indian experience has differed from that of the West. The observations of Eisenstadt, Kaviraj and others do also point to an undeniably modern sensibility present in India, although they do so directly and without systematically laying out the factors which make it so. This descriptive strength, coupled with a theoretical weakness, very clearly reflects the more general state of the approach. Modernity clearly does differ vastly from place to place, and this difference is cultural as well as institutional, but this insight takes us only halfway towards uncovering a broader theoretical approach which can be applied to manifestations of the modern around the world.

## 4 Alternatives to multiple modernities

Before concluding with some thoughts on how multiple modernities can reconcile some of these challenges, it may be useful to briefly examine whether alternative approaches have had greater success in reconciling the predictions of traditional modernisation theory with the variety of political and social systems in existence today.

One group of concepts, variously labelled 'alternative modernities' (Goankar 2001), 'modernity at large' (Appadurai 1996) and 'colonial modernities' (for example Burton 1999)—to name only a few—have developed within the field of cultural anthropology during the past two decades. Although restraints of space and cohesiveness prevent a comprehensive discussion of these concepts here, a few points may be noted. The discipline from which these terms originate necessitates a cultural interpretation of modernity, and all argue that modernity is itself

undergoing transformation even as it transforms. 'Alternative modernities', in particular, has so much in common with multiple modernities that it is surprising that each approach has so infrequently acknowledged the existence of the other. The former, too, claims that societal modernisation does not invariably lead to certain institutional orders or interpretative frameworks, and that the form modernity takes is greatly contingent on a unique response to local culture and politics (Goanekar 2001: 16).

Perhaps the most important contribution alternative modernities is able to make to the questions posed in the previous section concerns the notion of "creative adaptation", according to which people 'make' themselves modern and actively construct their own notion of modernity (Gaonkar 2001: 17). This would fit nicely into the emphasis on agency and autonomy discussed earlier, and provides a valuable bridge between societal convergence and cultural diversity. Thus the African diaspora, for example, is portrayed as possessing a uniquely modern consciousness of its own construction (Gilroy 1993). An added and crucial advantage of such an approach is the mechanism it could provide for the creation of manageable and meaningful units of analysis—now fragmentation has a countervailing force to prevent endless miniscule variations in modernity. As Gaonkar (2001: 23) puts it, 'just as societal modernisation (the prime source of convergence theories) produces difference through creative adaptation or unintended consequences, so also cultural modernity (the prime source of divergence theories) produces similarities in its own borders'.

Unfortunately, the concept of alternative modernities has yet to operationalise this interplay, and has hitherto thus had little overall impact in the study of modernity. It is even more lacking in formal definitions and hypotheses than is the theory of multiple modernities. Its conceptualisation of modernity itself is scanty, and its cases have been highly specific and anthropological in nature—snapshots rather than theories. Of course, much of this is due to the aims of its discipline, but this does mean that alternative modernities can only supplement, never supplant, a comprehensive theory of macropolitical and societal change. Similarly, Appadurai's (1996) 'modernity at large' seeks to analyse the globalisation of modernity primarily by focusing on the interplay between literature, history, ethnography and postcolonial studies, but deals little with the political forces that multiple modernity theorists rightly seek to incorporate into their analysis. In addition, its view of modernisation as largely positive overlooks some of the tensions inherent in this process, tensions which multiple modernities aims to elucidate.

This notion that modernity is constructed, perhaps by political elites or certain other indigenous modernising actors, is already present to a certain extent in the multiple modernities literature. Duara (2001), for example, argues that contemporary civilisations, in their essentialist, reified forms, resulted from the modernity project of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century rather than from authentic historical trajectories. By creating civilisations which embodied supposed sets of values defined in binary to the West, they were able to lend authority to political leadership and were appropriated by the nation-state system (Duara 2001).

If multiple modernities theory is to use comparative civilisational and cultural analysis as part of its toolbox (and I would argue that it is here where its unique contribution lies) it would do well to focus on how such identities are constructed. In this, it can also draw from theories of social constructivism, which argue that international norms and agents mutually constitute each other

and that identities and values often play a greater role in politics than do institutional or mercantilist concerns (for example Checkel 1998, Risse 2002). To return to the case of India, an analysis of whether various social groupings—the BJP, the Indian National Congress, the unions, the middle class and others—view themselves as modern and how they conceive of modernity itself could be useful in understanding the evolution of the concept. The most promising contribution in this regard has come from Wagner (2008b), who argues that civilisations are only one particular form of ‘societal self-understanding’. By taking ‘societal self-understandings’ as the primary unit of analysis, multiple modernities would better be able to account for the myriad contested and dynamic ways in which people in heterogenous political units, such as Brazil or South Africa, interpret their modern trajectories (Wagner 2008b).

Another alternative is Taylor's distinction between cultural and acultural theories of modernity. This, like multiple modernities, takes issue with theories which view modernity as value- and culture-neutral—as the revealing of humanity's universal, ‘true nature’ once old views are eventually sloughed off (Taylor 1995: 173). Even many anti-modern theories hold this view, hence their fear that traditional values are under threat. Instead, and this is where this theory diverges sharply from multiple modernities, Taylor (1995: 180) advocates a view of modernity as inextricably linked to Western assumptions about the individual, about science, and about religion. This ‘cultural theory of modernity’ means that societal and political changes are determined by our *habitus*—the unconscious backdrop against which explicit values and decisions are made (Bourdieu quoted in Taylor 1995)—and can thus never be free of culturally-specific assumptions.

Taylor's distinction, in many ways diametrically opposed to multiple modernities in its view of modernity as (in some, if not in all ways) fundamentally European, nonetheless suffers from some familiar problems. If *habitus* determines the extent and form of social change, this change must result in some sort of feedback loop which prevents cultural backgrounds from being static and inflexible. In addition, it is never fully specified whether modernity is capable of being reinterpreted by non-European cultures, and how this would occur.

A more plausible alternative to multiple modernities has also been proposed by its fiercest critic. Inspired by the literature on ‘varieties of capitalism’, Schmidt (2006, 2008) has argued that ‘varieties of modernity’ exist, but that the differences between them are family differences rather than differences in type. By focusing on culture, it is alleged, multiple modernities ignores the institutional and structural convergence that has been occurring throughout the world. Not only does it not accurately define its central concepts, but it lacks a clear methodology and is dangerously selective about the differences between nations that it chooses to acknowledge. ‘The question is not, at least cannot seriously be, whether there is diversity in the world...but what do we make of it?’, Schmidt (2006: 78) asks. Before we can speak of multiple modernities, he answers, we need to establish carefully whether coherent patterns of institutional covariation exist and what forms these pattern take. Because Schmidt suspects that the more fundamental differences are between modern and premodern societies rather than among modern ones (Schmidt 2006: 87), his proposal can be seen partially as an attempt to rehabilitate convergence theory and to bring it up to date with the current political and social reality.

Many of these points are valid, and will have to be taken seriously by advocates of multiple modernities theory. It is not enough to note that diversity exists, and the next step must surely

be to construct typologies and similar comparative frameworks to make sense of these diversity. Jepperson's (2002) division of European 'multiple political modernities' into 'social-corporate', 'state-corporate', 'state-nation' and 'liberal' variants, and Wagner's (1994) examination of mutations of Western modernity are examples of important site-specific work that has been done in this regard.

However, many of Schmidt's conclusions are as much a function of his institutional focus as those of multiple modernities are predicated on cultural analysis. Institutions are more malleable and measurable than culture, and phenomena such as urbanisation or democratisation more tangible (but not necessarily more important) than values such as autonomy or rationality. Schmidt suspects that modern-day Japan is more similar to contemporary Canada or Germany than it is to traditional Japan (2006: 81), but this depends on how convergence is operationalised.

In addition, allegations that multiple modernities has not at least attempted to define modernity are only partially justified, and shows an unfamiliarity with some of the more recent literature on the subject (for example Eisenstadt *et al* 2005). Finally, Schmidt (2006: 8) admits that a systematic enquiry into the varieties of modernity would have to study society in its entirety and that 'putting it to work may prove a task of such stupendous proportions that it cannot actually be accomplished'. One way to avoid such overambition, it would seem, would be to focus exactly at the level that Schmidt eschews. An emphasis on institutions alone has clearly not worked, as the spirited global critique of modernity and continuing impact of identity, value and culture has shown. An examination of how certain key cultural values have impacted—or failed to impact—on society is preferable to an approach which focuses only on the type of change which is often easily reversed and cosmetic. As a result of these limitations, the varieties of modernity approach has yet to be developed, whether by Schmidt or others, beyond the level of critique.

Lastly, there are of course those who would prefer we do away with the study of modernity altogether. Whether theorists of postmodernity who argue that modernity has been 'abandoned...destroyed, liquidated' (Lyotard 1984: 111), globalisation theorists who either conflate the two or see globalisation as replacing modernity (for example, Mazlish 2001) or those who claim that 'we have never been modern' to begin with (for instance, Latour 1993): all might argue that multiple modernities *needs* no alternative.

Such a view seems short-sighted, however, when one observes the polarising and mobilising effect that the concept of modernity continues to have in myriad societies. In countries as diverse as Turkey, China, Iran and Thailand, modernisation is one of the primary issues on the political agenda. Clashing interpretations of modernity can cause immense conflict; fundamentalisms of all kinds cannot fully be explained without reference to the concept, as we have seen.

It is not enough to cede the floor to globalisation, above all a process or vehicle rather than a substantive phenomenon. Nor can postmodernity step into the breach, as its debates and insights have been mainly confined to the European and North American experience. Ironically, as modernity has been deconstructed in the West, it has been reconstructed in Asia, South America and—to a lesser extent—Africa, where there is a conscious attempt to indigenise

modernity without simultaneously 'Westernising'. Wallerstein (1995: 472) expresses it well when he observes:

*The appeal of this kind of modernity [built on technological progress] has still not exhausted itself. There may be no doubt millions of children of the new age who assert that they reject this eternal quest for speed and for control of the environment...But there are billions—billions, not millions—of persons in Asia and Africa, in Easter Europe and Latin America, in the slums and ghettos of Western Europe and America, who yearn to enjoy fully this kind of modernity.*

## 5 Concluding thoughts

Multiple modernities is a promising theory in an area of political sociology that is still underdeveloped and which has had to contend with wide-ranging global transformations. The approach itself, however, is still in need of further development if it is to go beyond the level of critique. This paper has argued that multiple modernities, perhaps uniquely, faces attacks on two fronts: its focus on a plurality of modernities leads some to accuse it of deconstructing the concept to the point of meaninglessness, whereas its use of cultures, religions and civilisations as units of analysis lead to accusations from exactly the opposite end of the spectrum.

Ultimately, multiple modernities will have to confront the fact that, for modernity to retain any utility as a concept, we must be able to speak, as well, of the 'unmodern'. Until now, the concept has been very uncomfortable with such an approach, preferring instead to argue that we live in an age of modernity where proposals and counterproposals all use certain key, modern principles as reference points. However, this is not empirically, conceptually or theoretically satisfactory. It is preferable, instead, to view modernity as a single, coherent force—albeit one which is continually contested, can be reversed, and does not always get its way. Because this force will encounter different historical, cultural and political realities wherever it appears, the end result will inherently vary greatly from society to society.

Of course, many will view such an argument with trepidation: 'can the designation of something or some group as non- or pre-modern ever be anything but a gesture of the powerful?' (Chakrabarty 2002: xix). However, this was a far greater danger before the Janus-faced nature of modernity was truly recognised, and when modernity was still viewed as a holy grail which could cure all the superstitions and afflictions of society. Instead, modernity theory should approach modernity as *input* rather than *outcome*, and view the 'fully modern society' as one (unrealisable and probably undesirable) end of a continuum, rather than one side of a dichotomy. Modernity is not the definition of a society, but rather one force among several. The fact that none of the multiple modernities literature has as yet attempted a case study of 'African modernity' indicates that even it is perhaps vaguely aware of the uncomfortable possibility that different levels of modernity may exist within this 'modern age' of ours.

Once multiple modernities has refined its conceptual framework, it will be able to design methodologies and hypotheses that will allow it to contribute to a better understanding of the forms into which modernity has crystallised around the world. It will also be able to make use of social constructivism and creative adaptation in order to better determine whether modernity is better studied at the level of the civilisation, the state, the nation or the region. What it should

not do, however, is abandon its unique focus on culture and society. To finish, an example: a theorist concerned with the institutions of modernity, upon observing Iran in 1978, would have come away with the impression that the country had embarked on the road to a future very similar to that of Europe, the United States or, for that matter, Japan. She would little have been able to understand the roiling tensions beneath the institutional surface, or predicted the eruption that would occur only a year later. As theorists of modernity, that most revolutionary of concepts, we must look deep beneath the surface for the forces that continue to shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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