

**Comment**

## **Alternative Modernities, Alternatives to Modernity or Multiple Modernities – What Else?**

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The term ‘modernity’ as a received category and the host of connotations that accompany it has an inescapably West European provenance. These connotations remain predominant in the whole discourse, often even in the discourse which seeks alternatives to it. ‘Modern’ indeed leads us back into the division of historical time, itself a European construct. Historiography in Asian regions – China, Japan, India – did operate with a sense of historical time, but not one that divided chunks of history into one or another ‘period’. The birth of Islam did draw one sharp vertical line that divided history into the age of *jahiliya* – ignorance, savagery – and the age of Islam that had brought light of knowledge as defined by Islam. But the notion of ‘modern’ was absent from all these pursuits of history. I am not quite conversant with indigenous traditions of history writing in Africa and Latin America and am therefore unable to comment on them; but my hunch is that ‘modern’ is an importation from Europe there as well.

‘Modern’ was first used in Europe in the sixteenth century as a descriptive term, to denote the present as distinct from the past.<sup>1</sup> No value inhered in it; it wasn’t an analytical category. It was towards the end of the seventeenth century that a firm tripartite division of time in history was formulated, though it had been in evolution for a while. In 1688 the German historian Christopher Cellarius laid down the framework of Ancient, Medieval and Modern that has predominated history-writing since.<sup>2</sup> But this was no longer a mere description. Placed in the backdrop of post-Enlightenment, strong value judgment came to be deliberately invested in it. ‘Modern’ became the equivalent of rational

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, Eng. Tr. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p.27.

<sup>2</sup> Henry E. Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing* (New York, 1962), p.16.

and stood as the negation of the irrational which was equated with even a touch of the religious, equivalent of superstition. The 'modern' age stood in contrast to the preceding 'dark ages' of superstition and sheer blind faith.

Positivism, evolving to dominant heights during the eighteenth, nineteenth and a major part of the twentieth century in several variants including Marxism, lent further intensity to the value judgment with its privileging of science and technology as the arbiters of rationality vs irrationality. Modernity was predicated upon the principles of science in which verity or falsifiability of a phenomenon was demonstrable and its validity was universal. Religion in contrast was intuitive, subjective, personal. Science and technology were the means of achieving progress in the modern world; the rest were all best discarded. Scientific rationality was to pervade human life and endeavour.

'Modernity' was thus invested with the character of an abstraction – every society, institution or even an individual was to be adjudged as 'modern' going by the degree of one's approximation to this abstraction. In the era of post-Enlightenment and the early period of Positivism during much of the eighteenth century, the abstraction and the problematic of approximation to it remained a European, especially West European pre-occupation. It was colonialism that brought this version of modernity to the Asian and other continents and their vast numbers of inhabitants. With it also came intellectual constructs, such as division of historical time into Ancient, Medieval and Modern.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, this universal 'spread' of modernity was greatly lauded by almost every European thinker from James Mill, and Friedrich Hegel to Karl Marx and many others in-between who had been votaries of scientific reason, even as considerable differences, even oppositions, segregated them. Positivism permeated their thinking in all its hues. Positivism was premised upon a critical distinction – indeed counter positioning – between an objective reality and its subjective perception standing in a hierarchical relationship in which the objective reality always stood head and shoulders above subjective perception. The dichotomy had been imbibed from the disciplines of the natural sciences which operated with the basic premise of science in human hands seeking to understand the objective reality of nature out there. Human understanding could approximate to that reality through incremental knowledge, could even utilize it for the amelioration

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<sup>3</sup> See for a discussion various essays in the inaugural issue of *The Medieval History Journal*, 1998, focused on 'Contextualising the 'Medieval' in different regions.

of human life, but the objective reality remained immune to human intervention and alteration. To take an everyday kind of example, time was when human beings believed that the earth was flat or that the sun moved around the earth. Gradually, through incremental knowledge, the understanding that the earth was indeed round and that it moved on its own axis and around the sun has brought us in close proximity to, perhaps in complete coincidence with, the objective reality, but that would not enable us to flatten the earth or change its speed or direction of movement.

Social sciences, some yet in their nascent stage, seeking to emulate the methods of the natural sciences vied with each other to claim the status of science. Central to their claim and the attempt at emulation was the acceptance of the dichotomy between the objective reality and the subjective perception. The reality forever remained 'outside' of human intervention, just as nature was for a scientist. Leopold von Ranke's pithy dictum, 'History tells you as it actually happened' encapsulates this Positivist view on behalf of his discipline in a manner that is hard to excel. Noticeably, it is History, and not a historian or a group of historians, who tell you as it actually happened. History for him implied the totality of all information about the past which would all be put together one day. Historians' collective endeavour required them to gather all information and when the task would have been accomplished, History in its completeness would definitively *tell* us as it *actually* happened. This would be scientific history par excellence, for it would thus have accomplished the approximation to that objective reality out there; that done, no ambiguity would mark the voice of history.

For European thinkers of the nineteenth and a good part of the twentieth century then the 'spread' of modernity to the colonies was an objective historical necessity. Karl Marx was sensitive enough to realise the immense pain with which this 'necessity' was carried out by the impersonal forces of history, i.e. colonialism, but nothing else distinguished his applause for it from his contemporaries.<sup>4</sup>

'Modernity' found acceptance in the indigenous soil too, largely because the soil had been fertilized by seeds adopted from the West and continued to dominate even after 'liberation' and independence of these regions.

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<sup>4</sup> One hardly needs repeat Marx's most often cited remarks made in his 'The Future Results of British Rule in India' in K. Marx and F. Engels, *The First War of Independence, 1857-59* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Press, 1960), pp.33-44.

Paradoxically, it is the process of globalisation that has created avenues for questioning the dominance of modernity, or rather the dominant version of modernity. Paradoxically, because on one hand globalisation has integrated economies of all regions of the world on an unprecedented scale under the hegemony of capitalism, which is the sine qua non of the dominant version of 'modernity' although globalisation itself has a very long history behind it; on the other, it has created space for the self-assertion of the hitherto dominated regions. The crisis that is looming large in the world today affects Europe and the US much more virulently than it does major economies of the 'third world' such as China, India, Brazil or South Africa, for example.

It is time therefore to interrogate the received intellectual constructs – 'modernity' among them.

One mode of interrogation, which predates globalization but has not receded with it, has been to trace the 'sprouts' of 'modernity', i.e. capitalism (favourite phrase of Chinese historians around the middle of the twentieth century) in the history of one's own country before the onset of colonialism. This is perhaps the innate meaning of the term indigenous or native modernity (*deshaj adhunika* in Hindi).<sup>5</sup> However, often the criteria of 'modernity' are borrowed from Europe: the rise and growth of commercial capitalism, spread of money in the economy, growth of towns, signs of industrial entrepreneurship, signs also of respect for the individual and so forth. Historians of China and India in the two or three decades after the 1950s were abuzz with locating these signs in their own pasts and blaming colonialism for arresting their efflorescence.<sup>6</sup> This seems to me to implicate the acceptance of the

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<sup>5</sup> The term very frequently employed for example by Purushottam Agarwal in his innovative book in Hindi, *Akath Kahani Prem ki: Kabir ki Kavita aur Unka Samay* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> For a review of the Chinese historians's preoccupations, see Arif Dirlik, 'Revisioning Modernity: Modernity in Eurasian Perspectives', unpublished. For Soviet historians of India this was a major issue for study. Two distinguished historians, V. I. Pavlov and A. I. Chicherov, entertained no doubt about it; see Pavlov, *The Indian Capitalist Class: A Historical Study* (New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1964); *Historical Premises for India's Transition to Capitalism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Press, 1978). Also see A. I. Chicherov, *Indian Economic Development in 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Outline History of Crafts and Trade* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Press, 1971). Not all Soviet historians were, however, agreed with this hypothesis, for which see Eugenia Vanina, 'Russian Studies in Medieval Indian History and Society: An Insider's View', *The Medieval History Journal*, 2:2 (1999), pp.361-86. Among Indian historians Satish

universal validity of these criteria and launching a campaign of ‘me-tooism’.

Not a very happy situation, perhaps. Partly, because the premise of the growth of commerce as the harbinger of a ‘modern’ (i.e. commercial and subsequently industrial) economy in conflict with the pre-modern agrarian (feudal) economy, a dominant theme in European historiography in the 1920s and 30s has long been abandoned. Henri Pirenne, Belgian historian, was the chief proponent of this counter positioning of commerce and urbanization as signposts of modernity on one hand and rural economy as the encapsulation of feudalism on the other and had very powerful influence around the world. By the 1940s, the dichotomy he had constituted between what he had called ‘natural economy’ and ‘exchange’ economy and between the outward looking town and the inward looking country had been blown to bits in European historiography.<sup>7</sup> The title of one of Marc Bloch’s essays, ‘Natural economy or money economy – a pseudo-dilemma’ says it all.<sup>8</sup> It is a pity that the rural vs. urban dichotomy, equated with the feudalism vs. nascent capitalism problematic of Henri Pirenne arrived in full force in India (and West Asia) when it was gasping for breath in its home ground.<sup>9</sup>

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Chandra went all the way with signs of emerging capitalism in pre-colonial India; see his ‘Some Aspects of the Growth of Money Economy in India During the Seventeenth Century’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 3:4 (1966). On the other hand there were some very powerful dissenting voices too, like that of Irfan Habib who had persuasively argued that a very high degree of commerce and accumulation of commercial capital in a few hands in the Mughal era was no indication of the impending flowering of capitalism, colonialism or neo-colonialism. Irfan Habib, ‘Potentialities of Capitalist Development in Mughal Economy’, first published in *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. XXIX, 1969 and reproduced several times since.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred F. Havighurst recapitulates the debate in his *The Pirenne thesis; analysis, criticism, and revision*, (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Co., 1966).

<sup>8</sup> In his *Land and Work in Medieval Europe. Selected papers by Marc Bloch*, Eng. Tr. J.E. Anderson, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1967. The essay was first published in the original French as early as 1933 in *Annales d'Histoire sociale*, Vol. V.

<sup>9</sup> R.S. Sharma reproduces verbatim this dichotomy in his *Indian Feudalism c. 300-1200*, University of Calcutta, 1965; he has been followed by several other historians. E. Ashtor, *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages*, University of California, 1976. Even the title of Ashtor’s book copies Pirenne’s.

It is thus that the problematic of ‘modernity’ is heavily loaded; it brings with it a whole baggage of implicit and not so implicit concepts, notions and meanings which get incorporated in the search for it in one’s own past. Could one visualize an alternative to this vision of modernity?

Let me go back to my home ground – medieval Indian history, the long stretch of history encompassing a millennium from c. eighth to the eighteenth century. Let me however enter a caveat here that even the term ‘medieval’ we are using has a long and heavily loaded history and is not a mere, innocuous description of a given period of Indian (or for that matter any other) history.<sup>10</sup> In one long shot, the millennium in India’s past is a breathtakingly dynamic period in every sphere of human life – technology, economy, trade, state-building, administration, rise and growth of languages, a mass movement of protest against social inequities, extremely sophisticated elite culture manifest in some exquisite forms of music, architecture, painting etc. and very deeply rooted popular culture, especially social values, each of which leaves an indelible impress on the other. After all, it was Europe, Western Europe in particular, which was staring wide eyed at India and not the other way around down to the mid-eighteenth century. Yet, none of this was leading to capitalism or capitalist modernity, never mind the signs that could mislead us. What shape India would have taken in the nineteenth, twentieth and the twenty-first centuries if colonialism had not intervened becomes a futile question. Any guess would be good enough, for it can never be ‘proved’ or ‘disproved’. But surely to assume that with such a long history of the sub-continent’s coping with and absorbing challenges in an ever changing scenario on all fronts and coming off the richer for it, India was doomed to get colonised or else become defunct in the ‘modern period’ appears absurd. There is no inevitability in history. It is therefore at least theoretically possible to envisage alternatives to ‘modernity’ as we have received it or, even more plausibly, multiple modernities. The teleology that capitalist modernity which has *empirically* enveloped the world was therefore the single, inescapable *conceptual* option before humanity should leave one highly dissatisfied.

So far I have centred the discussion in the received notion of modernity, i.e. capitalist modernity, chiefly on the economy. There is surely more, much more to modernity than the economy. What about the

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<sup>10</sup> For a brief overview, see Harbans Mukhia, ‘Medieval’ India: An Alien Conceptual Hegemony?, *The Medieval History Journal*, 1:1 (1998), pp.91-105, reproduced in H. Mukhia, *Exploring India’s Medieval Centuries: Essays in History, Society, Culture and Technology* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2010), pp.31-48.

much broader area of culture? One cultural premise of modernity is the autonomy of the individual and the normative equality of all individuals. It is on this premise that another modern conception, that of liberal democracy, is predicated. The premise manifests itself in the gradual withdrawal of extraneous controls – those of the family, the community, the society or the state -- over the individual's decision making in most, if not all, spheres of life – career, marriage, exercise of the franchise, whatever. This profile of the 'modern' individual which also has its origins in post-Renaissance Europe, seeks to obliterate other forms of self-assertion of the individual not in opposition to, but in harmony with family, community and society. I have dealt with the theme elsewhere<sup>11</sup> and would therefore reproduce only the skeleton of the argument here.

To begin with, the urge for human equality has found expression in one or another religious or secular form over centuries: whether it is Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism or Marxian socialism, the basic egalitarian yearning inspired them all, even if egalitarian ideologies and the movements that followed in their wake were never able to accomplish equality as a social reality; what they did however was to enlarge the space for the upward mobility for groups that lay at the lower rungs. These modes of the quest for social equality did not counter pose the individual and the other social units like the family, the community, the society etc.; their search was located in a symbiosis of the individual and the religious/social community. Buddhism has universally been perceived as protest against social inequalities based upon one's birth inherent in Brahmanical norms in India. In the Buddhist *sangha* the ordained monks were all treated as equal irrespective of their previous background, though as the exclusive preserve of men, it did not become a votary of gender equality. The monotheistic character of the other religions – Christianity, Islam, Sikhism – also evoked egalitarian urges of the deprived masses. A single God being the creator of all humanity also cares for everyone in equal measure and is equally accessible to all. Indeed, in some extremely powerful ways, monotheistic religious identity establishes equality among believers by becoming the single cementing bond and displacing other internal cleavages, such as those of birth, wealth, status, caste etc. Among the Sikhs, the practice of community singing, *kirtan*, and the service of community dining, *langar*, in which everyone sits together on the same floor and everyone serves

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<sup>11</sup> 'Liberal Democracy and its Slippages' in Okwui Enwezor *et.al.*, (eds.), *Democracy Unrealised*, Documenta 11\_Platform 1 (Berlin: Hartje Cantz Publishers, 2002), pp.393-404.

everybody else the food prepared in the community kitchen is a symbolic reminder of equality of all in the midst of veritable distinctions.

It is extremely significant, however, that equality was not a quest that inspires only ones deprived of it, unlike capitalism's understanding of it. If acquisition drives capitalism, well thought out complete renunciation of one's worldly possessions, comforts and status has been a strong element of almost every religion. This was a protest against the high and mighty, against unequal access to resources, whether economic, cultural or spiritual. The search for equality by the renouncers is a humane quest which goes beyond the immediate concerns of ameliorating one's misery that one is born or driven into. When Prince Gautam walked out of his palace at the dead of night, and left a devout and grieving wife and son behind, to seek enlightenment wandering in the forests and found it in an egalitarian social ideology and ethics (*dhamma*), he was not pitching the self against society but seeking space for everyone within it. The sufi protest against the state normatively takes the form of denying any association with it, thus protesting against privilege of any kind. The notion of a single universal God which inspired the medieval Indian saint poets like Kabir, Nanak, Dadu Dayal and a host of others, unlike a god for each religious sect, underlined the equality of all human beings.

The bonding of belonging to one community, religious or other, blurs many cleavages at both ends. Those at the receiving end of social cleavages experience an upward mobility through these bonds, and those at the higher rungs experience a sense of 'nobler meaning' in life in dedicating, or even sacrificing their lives for the shared religious or other forms of community identity than merely seeking a materially well-appointed life for themselves. The number of highly educated, qualified and successful professionals who get involved in what are perceived as acts of terror, at times inspired by religious fervour as on and since 9/11 in a number of regions across the world, at others by the desire to change the world into a better one through violent revolutions, has often surprised liberal commentators everywhere. Che Guevara and Fidel Castro were cult figures for the youth around the world in the 1960s; for the liberal establishment of the U.S. they were anarchic terrorists, even if the term was then not in use. For, they defy all basic assumptions of capitalist modernity which are centred on the supremacy of the individual to the exclusion of other commitments. To the 'terrorists', the other commitments are their own medium of establishing 'democracy' of the faith in opposition to the privileging of the individual, including themselves. Capitalism's assumption of universal triumph of its version of democracy derives from its self-image of invincible uniformity which



abrogates the very diverse histories of the rise of democracies experienced by humanity; the uniformity of this image also lends to it an aggressiveness to enforce its universal application, predicated upon the eradication of all diversities. But globalisation has, by empowering hitherto subjugated regions and cultures, enlarged space for the re-emergence and re-assertion of these diversities.

It may be possible then to suggest that the single meaning attached to 'modernity' be broken down and to explore plurality that can and should be invested in it. It would enable the many regions of the world with many diverse histories to seek their own entry points into modernity. The enormous violence that inheres in the imposition of the single version on all of humanity accumulates into utter viciousness, with or without the use of arms. We might also revisit the sanctity of the conception of the 'modern' itself, quite besides its western provenance; how will the very 'modern' nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries be viewed in, say, the twenty-fifth century?<sup>12</sup> Surely not modern and not ancient or medieval either. Surely some new categories of analysis will have replaced this tripartite division of history and the single notion of modernity. For, clearly the 'modernity' of the 'modern' is very transient. Cognisance of the transient nature of what we assume as universally and immutably modern should induce some humility in the attempt to lead the whole of the world into the single lane traversed by Western Europe centuries ago.

Is the argument then to substitute region and history-specific multiple 'modernities' for Euro-centric modernity that we have been heirs to?<sup>13</sup> In some ways this indeed has been in process. China has charted out its own path into late modernity first by making a socialist revolution under the leadership of the Communist Party and now into fully fledged capitalism again under the Communist Party's dictatorship. A third of the world also experimented with socialism in the twentieth century and then returned to the fold of capitalism with varying degrees of political and civil freedoms that have accompanied capitalist modernity in the West. Japan has combined its traditional family

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<sup>12</sup> No such anxiety assails Peter Raedts who is confident that '... the classical periodisation of European history into Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modern History is a fact we had better accept instead of bickering about it. It will never go away.' Peter Raedts, 'When Were the Middle Ages?', in Sølvi Sogner (ed.), *Making Sense of Global History* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2001), p.292.

<sup>13</sup> Arif Dirlik indeed seems to argue forcefully on its behalf in the context of the history of China in 'Revisioning Modernity', unpublished.

structure and even the ‘medieval’ ethics of loyalty to the employer with the second most advanced capitalist economy. On the other hand, the US itself and Europe are getting extremely nervous when the exercise of civil liberties crosses the limits set by them in the interests of the state, i.e. the political and bureaucratic class; witness the current of nervousness that WikiLeaks has unleashed in the ‘free world’. Even so, viable as the argument is, the substitution of ‘multiple modernities’ for Euro-centred modernity would merely amount to ‘multi-centred modernities’.

Perhaps a more fruitful perspective would be to divest ‘modernity’ of its acquired linear meaning from Europe and recognise interactive global participation in the evolution of the world we live in and our future generations will inhabit. Throughout history, collectively of all humanity and individually of different regions, short and long distance exchanges of material goods and interaction of ideas has shaped this evolution.<sup>14</sup> Even conquests of vast territories, such as those of Chingiz Khan and his successors, generally perceived in western historiography as the most destructive before the World Wars, created a trans-continental consciousness;<sup>15</sup> trade across continents of course has as long a history as we can trace. So too the history of religions, cultures and ideas. In our own times the pace of such interaction has become almost frantic, nibbling away, if little by little, the hitherto hegemonic global presence of one region’s economy or its culture.

The recognition of the multifaceted interactive globality of this evolution of the modernity of our times and of the future perhaps has the potential to ensure a greater degree of mutual respect and diminution of conflict, something incompatible with the vision of modernity as a unilinear and univocal abstraction.

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<sup>14</sup> The argument has been evolving for some time now; see for example, Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> See for a persuasive argument, Roxann Prazniak, ‘Siena on the Silk Roads: Ambrogio Lorenzetti and the Mongol Global Century, 1250-1310’, *Journal of World History*, 21:2 (2010), pp.177-217.