

Commentary

Modernity and modernization by *SN Eisenstadt*

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Introduction

The article outlines Eisenstadt's multiple modernities approach for the analysis of modern society. Following a conceptual part explicating the term's meaning and distancing the approach from the sociological tradition as well as from classical modernization theory, it discusses some of the challenges presented by contemporary globalization processes.

Critique

As in various other publications, Eisenstadt is concerned with demonstrating the superiority of his approach over the theories of modernization developed in the 1950s and 1960s, which he says have been empirically refuted by the realities that emerged in the past half century, most importantly because the worldwide expansion of modern arrangements that took place in this period, rather than producing roughly similar conditions in different locations, has resulted in a great deal of diversity. This diversity, says Eisenstadt, can be accounted for only by shedding the notion of modernity in the singular and replacing it by that of multiple modernities: of modernity in the plural. There are several problems with this argument, as well as with the thrust of the article more generally.

First, it rests on a conceptualization of modernity that differs substantially from that of modernization theory and the sociological classics. Now while there is principally nothing wrong with devising new, alternative conceptualizations, the juxtaposition of findings generated from different analytic perspectives often results in category mistakes. Eisenstadt's analyses are a case in point. His reconstruction of modernization theoretical thought makes it plain that this theory conceives of modernity as a stage in the history of

societal evolution, as a distinct societal formation that sets it apart from other such formations. This formation, while spawning unique forms of cultural expression and shaping a new type of personality, is primarily analysed in structural terms, i.e. with regard to the social structural and institutional changes that it brings about. Eisenstadt, by contrast, treats modernity as a particular cultural configuration, as a new civilization characterized by a distinct cultural 'programme' comprising a set of key ideas, which, however, are played out differently in different contexts, not least due to their inherent contradictions, which leave ample scope for interpretation politics and for differential implementation. Both perspectives are justified in their own right. They are, however, strictly speaking incommensurable because they focus on different aspects of the same reality, ask different questions about it and hence, unsurprisingly, produce different results. Consequently, their findings can be used neither directly in support of, nor to invalidate, each other's propositions. As for the findings that Eisenstadt holds against modernization theory, they are also pitched at too low a level of abstraction to pose a genuine challenge for that theory. At the same time, sober-minded analyses of global developments through modernization theory's own lenses yield many commonalities that are fully in line with the theory's premises (Schmidt, 2010). These commonalities are systematically ignored or downplayed by its critics.

Second, and related to the above, Eisenstadt keeps reiterating that the reality of modern society does not accord with what he calls the homogenizing assumptions of modernization theory because that reality exhibits much more diversity than these assumptions can accommodate. I beg to differ. But be this as it

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may, assuming anyone doubted the importance of the phenomena Eisenstadt cites to substantiate his claim, what could he say in response? Other than asserting their importance, he could say very little. There is certainly no dearth of diversity in the modern world. Yet, not all differences carry the same conceptual weight for a theory of modernity. To determine their weight, one needs criteria, and these criteria must be derived from theoretical propositions that render them significant, for facts are meaningless unless considered within a theoretical framework. Eisenstadt nowhere provides the requisite criteria. Nor does he, for that matter, offer a sufficiently worked-out theory of modernity from which they could be derived. Instead, he simply posits the significance of whatever evidence he alludes to. But apodictic claims are not commonly viewed as suitable means for settling (social) scientific disputes.

Third, his civilization-theoretic approach is ill-equipped to come up with a convincing explanation for the rise of Asian (and other emerging) countries that Eisenstadt rightly says challenge Western cultural hegemony. For these countries, as Mahbubani (2008: 52; author's italics) aptly put it, are 'not succeeding because of a rediscovery of some hidden or forgotten strength of Asian civilizations' but because 'they have finally' learned the lessons from the West's rise, as did Japan almost a century earlier. In other words, the non-Western world is not gaining strength because it is so different from the West, but because, following sustained modernization processes, it has become more like the West. This, in turn, enables it to reject unwanted offers or perceived impositions and to demand more say over the shaping of world order, as well as over policies affecting it (Schmidt, 2009). At the same time, it expands the possible space for institutional innovation, as local variations of established norms and forms can be selected and retained with less risk of external interference. Over time, this may result in interpretations of 'the' modern condition that can differ substantially from those prevailing today. The currently dominant interpretations are enshrined in 'world models'

(Meyer et al., 1997) reflecting primarily Western experiences, interests and sentiments. The breakthrough of global modernity (Schmidt, 2007) for the first time puts these models' postulated universalism to a serious reality test – with the outcomes anything but certain.

Conclusion

Eisenstadt makes several valid observations but lacks a theoretical framework from which to make proper sense of them. Modernization theory, the main target of his criticism, offers a better point of departure for analyses of global social change. It is certainly not flawless, but it is stronger than its critics say, and multiple modernists have yet to prove their paradigm's analytic superiority which, while currently fashionable, has thus far done little more than belabouring the obvious: to maintain that there is diversity in the world. But who questions that?

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