

Rethinking modernity and capitalism: Add context and stir by Jan Nederveen Pieterse

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In his stimulating but provocative essay, 'Rethinking modernity and capitalism: Add context and stir', Jan Nederveen Pieterse (JP) takes us on a road which is both familiar and new. In reviewing JP's piece, I have chosen to comment on and discuss three selected themes.

Social science as a 'contested' scape

As a starter, let me say that I also see JP's essay as a stock-taking commentary and review of the current 'state of the arts' in social science theorizing and thinking. Though I somewhat agree with JP on the increasing usurpation of current discourses of modernity and capitalism in the social sciences by convergence thinking and macro-sociology, I also like to think that social science also constitutes a 'scape', perhaps a 'missing scape' to be added on to Appadurai's original schema of global 'scapes' (2005; also see: Zawawi, 2012: 1–19) – which, being similar to other scapes, also harbours its own differences and disjunctures. It is characterized by its own repertoire of binary constructs and contesting epistemologies, theories and concepts, such as: global versus local, centre versus periphery, Orientalism and Eurocentrism or the colonial versus Occidentalism, the anticolonial or the Other, multipolar versus unipolar, universal versus particular, convergence versus pluralism, nomothetic versus idiographic approaches, macro versus micro, modernity versus postmodernism, hegemony versus agency. Whilst its knowledge production and interpretation is always ongoing, cumulative and contested, it is ultimately a scape forged and consolidated by an epistemic community of global scholars whose modus operandi is defined by a 'sacred' framework, the fundamental principles of which have long been established. This means that despite its contested rup-

tures, this social scientific scape has always been a laboratory and dialogical space capable of generating its own constructive and critical exchanges – across borders, within or across nations, for collaborative work, or for coming to terms with difference and diversity.

Hence whilst JP laments on the dominance of macro-sociology and convergence thinking, I also remember my days as a sociology student when we were enthralled by being exposed to micro-sociological perspectives that posed the much needed counter-theorization to the 'grand narratives'. It was a time when functionalism and conflict theories ruled the day; hence we welcomed the alternative 'sociology of everyday life' which delved into the symbolic and interactive perspective of social life, the works of Mead and Goffman, for instance, or the 'sociology of knowledge' from Berger and Luckmann, not to forget Giddens' well-known treatise on 'structuration' and 'agency' – all these were empowering in being able to provide us with the 'missing link', as an alternative perspective, to either contest or complement the dominant perspectives from macro-sociology. Whilst Marxist ideas of 'class struggle' remained elusive, the rise of cultural studies, pioneered by the Birmingham School, inspired by Gramscian ideas, also provided another moment of alternative sociology to contest hegemonic perspectives and deconstruct essentialist categories, or to embrace agency and resistance. As an example, the field of popular culture has very much been the site of such theoretical contestations. Again in countering Eurocentrism (Orientalism) and institutionalized 'regimes of truth', both Edward Said and Foucault have also brought their own respective 'discourses' to the table. The relationship between power and knowledge, the struggle over meanings, provides cultural studies with new modes of problematizing and analysis, away from mainstream sociology, to grapple with contemporary issues such as identity

Sociopedia.isa

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Zawawi Ibrahim, 2014, 'Commentary on Rethinking modernity and capitalism: Add context and stir',
Sociopedia.isa, DOI: 10.1177/20568460016

politics, hybridities, representations, modernities, including globalization (Barker, 2006). The trajectory of alternative social science also extends into post-colonial studies and inter-Asia cultural studies as well (see Chen, 1998; Shohat and Stam, 1994). As an initial conclusion, by way of drawing some pointers from the overview, I take a position contrary to JP's reflections – that the social science 'scape' has always been a fluid playing field and epistemologically, always contested. The process of theory formation and construction in social science, including its reformulations and the debates surrounding it, is both cumulative and ongoing in which there are no real winners or losers.

Concretizing history and utilizing anthropological methodology as an option

Having said that, I am in full agreement with JP that a way out of macro theories is to 'capture the dynamics of actual history'. We have seen how western-based theories of modernization, and Rostow's theory of 'stages of economic growth', are both ahistorical and unilinear. In addition, they are also not empirically grounded but exist at a level of abstraction based on 'ideal types'. Whilst JP, in his review, chooses to elaborate on the particular history of the 'China question' as an exercise in utilizing 'historical sociology', it is instructive to remind ourselves that there is already a template that should be our key reference for this discourse: here, of course, I am referring to the rigorous comparative historical analysis undertaken by Barrington Moore Jr in his landmark work, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966).

In his overview, JP also seeks methodological alternatives from anthropology as a way out of the fetish of macro-sociology and convergence thinking, specifically in 'thick description' and 'multi-sited ethnography'. Coming from the field of anthropology, I welcome this methodological shift. Whilst the notion of 'thick description' owes very much to Clifford Geertz when anthropologizing Indonesian rituals, ethnographically anthropology has also liberated itself from the 'grand narratives' of the author-driven texts of functionalist anthropology. It has since made forays into postmodernist ethnography (including multi-sited ethnography) in order to move a decentring notion of representation in anthropology as well as to resolve its 'crisis of representation' – 'a literary turn' in anthropology which has led to an auto-critique of the classical texts in anthropological ethnography (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fontana, 1994; Gardner and Lewis,

1996; Marcus and Fischer, 1986). I am convinced that the forays into anthropological methodologies as proposed by JP will further enhance his 'on the ground' revelations of VOC (varieties of capitalism) at work. This option fits in well with his search for an 'inter-disciplinary comparative study' to unravel both 'the particular' and the 'universal'. Such an undertaking will undoubtedly promise something new in our future understanding of VOC in the current landscape of globalization in different parts of Asia and the world.

A déjà vu: On anthropologizing capital and the peasantry in peripheral capitalism

JP's overview also has a familiar *déjà vu* tone to it because it takes us down memory lane to the days of old when debates flourished on exactly the same issue of enquiry raised by JP – i.e. on what 'capitalism' is. But at that particular juncture of the discourse, it emerged in the context of problematizing capitalism in the periphery which lies outside the ambit of its 'original transition' (Roxborough, 1979: 1–26). I believe that this old debate could be considered a forerunner to some of the issues raised by JP in his essay, perhaps not so much in the context of the current era of globalization and the problematics of capitalism and modernity. Back then, it was in the context of making sense of 'capitalism' in peripheral capitalist formations (also referred to as 'the Third World'), and specifically in the agricultural sector, with its attendant 'agrarian question'. Deliberating on the theoretical, conceptual and epistemological issues raised in JP's reflections, especially his concerns over a deterministic and singular macro and Eurocentric view of capitalism, the convergence thinking in sociology, and the need for a more 'flexible analysis' (including methodologically exploring 'a thick description of practices and relations' and 'multi-sited ethnographies'), there could indeed be some lessons to be learnt from this earlier debate.

For those who are familiar with the discourse, the initial debate was triggered by what may be considered as a necessary theoretical intervention by Laclau (1971) to the Gunder Frankian assertion of the totality of 'capitalism' at the periphery as well as its integration into a single economic system with central capitalism (1969). With the vantage of hindsight, the critique was perhaps the first of its kind to inform us of the 'hybridity' and the 'layers' of capitalism; specifically drawing from Laclau's perceptive observation (1971) in distinguishing capitalism 'at work' at the level of market relations (exchange) from that of production relations: that pre-capitalist

relations of production and exploitation may not necessarily be 'dissolved' into capitalist production relations (indeed, they can be 'conserved') even if the periphery has already been fully integrated into capitalist market relations. It seems that if there is at all any value in differentiating the phase of 'merchant capital' from that of 'industrial capital' (alluded to by JP), it is the incapacity of merchant capital, to reorganize and transform the existing relations of production and exploitation that it encounters in the periphery into capitalist ones (Kay, 1975: 94–9). Ultimately, it is only in the phase of 'industrial capitalism', through the 'import of capital' from the centre, that commodity production and exploitation of labour in the periphery could finally be organized along capitalist lines. This is also a 'political' phase in which the whole imperialist project is eventually secured by formal control of the periphery via the imposition of the colonial state whose subsequent administrative and legal policies over land, labour and other resources further help to consolidate the domination and penetration of colonial capital from the centre.

In grappling with the 'agrarian question' in the new commodified landscape of the periphery, anthropology sees the rise of a new paradigm shift – the New Economic Anthropology – which attempts to break away from an older 'economic anthropology' – a field which treats 'peasants' purely as a descriptive 'human type' category (Clammer, 1978; Ennew et al., 1977). In contrast, the new theoretical paradigm is more concerned with relocating the peasantries as non-wage producers, as a dominant 'labour fraction' in peripheral capitalist formations (Bernstein, 1977; Cleaver, 1976). It should be noted that this new brand of Economic Anthropology is initially grounded on developing and elaborating on Marxist ideas of pre-capitalist formations, which draws its initial inspiration from French Marxist anthropologists and scholars, whose major concern is to investigate and elaborate on the nature of pre-capitalist relations and their 'articulation' with capitalism during the different phases of imperialist contact (Bradby, 1975; Dupre and Rey, 1973; Godelier, 1977; Meillassoux, 1972, 1973). My own concern with the above debate, as shared by other anthropologists of peasant society then, was similarly informed by the 'agrarian question' problematique, seeking for a theoretical solution. Whilst the specific concern of the then emerging neo-Marxist sociology/political economy of 'development and underdevelopment' is not on the 'peasant question' per se, the debate becomes a interdisciplinary scholarly base and intellectual platform to dialogue and discuss what capitalism is in relation to agriculture, which, in the initial phase, the empirical focus revolves predominantly

around the 'Indian debate' (mediated via the Indian-based *Economic and Political Weekly*, and later, *Journal of Peasant Studies* and *Journal of Contemporary Asia*) (see also: Alavi, 1975; Banaji, 1975, 1976; McEachern, 1976; Patnaik, 1979). It becomes clear that the anthropological project on 'the peasant question' is to move away from a homogenizing macro view of capitalism and explore 'the thick description' of what actually goes on in the actual social process and relations in which non-wage producers in Third World agricultural sector have been 'touched' and reconstituted by capital without the latter being actually transformed into proletarians by 'working directly for capital'. In other words, the task of the new 'peasant anthropology' is to explore the 'multi-sited ethnography' and 'thick description' pertaining to the encounter between the capital and the peasantry. Through this grounded discourse, the new economic anthropology is thus able to offer concrete ethnographic narratives based on the everyday struggle of the peasantry – in 'working indirectly for capital' under peripheral capitalism.

The discourse owes very much to Bernstein who provides the initial methodological lead for anthropologists when he asserts that 'the site of capital peasant relations in the first place is the struggle over the conditions of production' (1976: 58). Galeksi has already observed that Third World peasants are non-capitalist producers formally subsumed under capitalism (cited in Roseberry, 1976: 48–9). In the same vein, Bernstein (1977, 1979) emphasizes that the relationship between capital and the peasantry should not be seen in terms of whether capital is actually taking on the function of organizing peasant production directly. A 'penetration' model of capital moves away from looking at how peasant units of production have become 'capitalistic' to how the *conditions* of production and reproduction of these units (i.e. peasant households) are themselves dictated by capital. Capital controls agricultural production in a different way than it does with industrial production. By integrating peasants into its process of exchange, through circulation, capital may not necessarily expropriate them: capital regulates and controls the conditions of peasant production and reproduction without itself being directly involved in its organization. Circulation capital in this context is a mediator through which capital imposes its control over the conditions of production and reproduction among non-capitalist commodity producers.

The multi-sited ethnography of the impact of this confrontation between capital and the peasantry can be further elaborated. Peasant households under capitalist domination have no options but to chase 'exchange values' through the production and sale of

commodities in order to underwrite their social reproduction. In times of 'reproduction squeeze' (due to economic inflation, or price fluctuations of their commodities in the market, or when households experience loss of income because of natural calamities or other forms of exploitation), household members have to extend their hours of work in order to chase exchange-values (Kautsky's idea of 'self-exploitation'), or experience reduction of subsistence and 'ceremonial funds', indebtedness, even loss of land. Failure to maintain peasant household social reproduction through commoditization eventually leads to poverty and further marginalization of the peasantry, including proletarianization through the release of younger household members for wage-labour outside agriculture (see Zawawi, 1998, 2010).

It is clear that the problematique raised by JP in grappling with 'capitalism' is far from over, even though he is dealing with 'global capitalism'. The above case study clearly demonstrates the value of recognizing the different levels of 'capitalism at work', and the necessity of utilizing a methodology which can interrogate the process from below, by way of 'thick description' and elucidating the concrete multi-sited ethnographic narratives of the relationship between capital and peasant producers.

Conclusion

I fully understand that the gist of JP's broad overview addresses a new problematique in the context of current globalization, i.e the analytical and conceptual relationship between capitalism and modernity. On the other hand, we also need to 'concretize' both 'modernity' and 'capitalism' (and VOC) at the level of the empirical and historical specificity. JP's project thus calls upon concrete cross-cultural empirical (including historical sociology) research based on imaginative methodologies in order to elucidate similarities and differences, the particular from the universal, and ultimately to facilitate comparison. In the process, interdisciplinary comparative perspectives also need to be consolidated. Some aspects of the issues raised beg epistemological responses, whilst others call upon the identification of appropriate units of analysis, be it the state economic and cultural policies, governance, civil society and citizenry, or social classes, representing both capital and labour – the whole 'mix', so to speak, 'stirred', hybridized and juxtaposed in various ways in a given historical social formation, under globalization (Eriksen, 2007). JP's intervention is indeed a timely one, but it opens up more questions than answers. But as the author rightly asserts: the discourse on modernity and capi-

talism must stop with generalizations: it is now time for explanations.

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