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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schmidt, V. H. (2006). Multiple modernities? The case against. In K.-S. Rehberg (Ed.), *Soziale Ungleichheit, kulturelle Unterschiede: Verhandlungen des 32. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in München. Teilbd. 1 und 2* (pp. 2883-2894). Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verl. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-143319>

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# Multiple Modernities? The Case Against

*Volker H. Schmidt*

## 1. Introduction

In the 1990s a new paradigm emerged to conceptualize the contemporary world: the concept of multiple modernities. The protagonists of the new paradigm share a number of key assumptions about the modern world, as well as a common aversion to the modernization theory of the 1950s and 1960s which they claim provides an oversimplified, empirically incorrect and normatively questionable view of this world. The main point of contention is the theory's premise that modernization is a homogenizing process, ultimately leading to the convergence of the societies undergoing it; another its alleged proclivity to equate one particular variant of modernity – that of »the« West or, narrower still, North America – with modernity itself by elevating it »to the status of a world historical yardstick« (Wittrock 2000: 54). Against both views, the critics emphasize modern societies' diversity. Not only are there, according to these critics, several paths to modernity, but different historical trajectories and socio-cultural backgrounds also give rise to highly distinct forms of modernity in different parts of the world. In fact, even Europe, where it all began, exhibits a great deal of cultural and institutional diversity.

But is that really a new insight? The question is not whether there is diversity in the world. There certainly is. But what do we make of it? How *much* diversity is there? What *kinds* of diversity exist between different modern societies? How *profound* are the existing differences? What is their social theoretic *significance*? And what are their future prospects? Are they more likely to persist, to withstand further social change, or do we have reason to expect that they will diminish in the long run? Moreover, if we all live in the modern era now, does this imply that all societies are equally modern? Or is modernity a matter of degree? What does it mean (or take) to be modern anyway?

To answer questions of this kind one needs a reasonably clear understanding of the concept of modernity – or modern society – itself. The literature on multiple modernities contributes little to this understanding; it only distances itself from what it takes to be the most objectionable views of modernization theory without offering an alternative definition or proposal. Instead it largely relies on an implicit

notion of modernity which, when closely scrutinized, actually appears surprisingly similar to that underlying much of the work of modernization theorists, only thinner. Thus, whereas modernization theory aims to capture the *whole* structure of modern society and *all* aspects of the dramatic change processes that give rise to its emergence, the literature on multiple modernities focuses almost exclusively on *cultural* factors and the ways these are believed to frame *politics* and the *political order* (as though modernity was identical with its polity), as well as, in some instances, on *religion*. Not surprisingly, to the extent that a theory of modernity is outlined at all, it is a self-proclaimed cultural theory (see Taylor/Lee, no year).

In the pages ahead, I will first present a brief summary of some of the main points raised in the multiple modernities literature. This will be followed by a few critical remarks and the suggestion of an alternative approach that, while able to address many of the former's substantive concerns, avoids its most serious flaws. A brief conclusion sums up what I believe can be learned from trying to put this alternative approach to work.

## 2. Multiple Modernities: A Brief Discussion

One view that several authors working with the multiple modernities paradigm share is that modernity is first and foremost a cultural »program« – or more precisely, a multiplicity of such programs, not an institutional reality (Eisenstadt 2000). Of course it is an institutional reality too, but this reality is itself grounded in, or gives expression to, a number of deep-seated »promissory notes«, as Wittrock (2000) calls them. Before the various revolutions that we associate with the rise of modernity in Europe – the industrial revolution, the scientific revolution, the political revolution, the educational revolution – could take place, another revolution, the intellectual revolution, had to be accomplished. This intellectual revolution set the stage for a fundamental epistemic transformation that made the modern project possible in the first place.

At the core of this epistemic transformation lies the European enlightenment. It questions the givenness of social order and raises the awareness of its makeability, hence contingency. The concomitant delegitimation of traditional political and religious authority sets in motion a process which ultimately leads to the establishment of a radically different order, that of political democracy. In addition to the new political order, various other innovations give rise to new institutions which become emblematic of the modern world: the rule of law and a legally protected private sphere, the market economy, civil society, the freedom of thought and science, and others.

So far, the account is relatively uncontroversial and could probably be underwritten by several modernization theorists as well, even though they might place less emphasis on cultural factors and focus more on the socio-economic transformation of society. They also have no problem accepting the proposition that modernization is a »continuous and open-ended process«, to use the words of Krishan Kumar (1999: 72). Conversely, the advocates of the multiple modernities approach agree with modernization theorists that the »project of modernity«, once it had firmly taken root in the West, soon began to have global relevance.

The main disagreements concern the consequences that modernization processes have for different societies. As mentioned before, modernization theorists claim that societies undergoing such processes tend to become more similar over time in their institutional outlooks and culture, whereas their critics from the multiple modernities camp insist on the prevalence of fundamental cultural and institutional differences despite modernization. The very refusal to speak of modernity in the singular, rather than of multiple modernities, alludes to this difference.

But how many modernities are there? At one level, the literature on multiple modernities seems to imply that there are as many modernities as there are modern societies (which tend to be equated with states in this literature). This reading is suggested by accounts of multiple modernities, such as that given by Wittrock, according to which there are not only many different varieties of modernity outside the Western hemisphere, but also within it. Thus, French modernity differs from German modernity differs from Scandinavian modernity differs from American modernity and so forth. But that is not really what the protagonists of the multiple modernities paradigm want to say. Their main point is that there are modernities *outside* the West that cannot be fully understood in terms of the categories and concepts developed to make sense of *Western* modernity, or at least that do not and will not converge with the institutional forms and structures that modernity has come to adopt in the West. Modernity, on this view, crystallizes around major human civilizations, such as European (or Western, or Judeo-Christian) civilization, Japanese civilization, Sinic civilization, Indian (or Hindu) civilization, Islamic civilization, and perhaps even Latin American civilization, all of which leave their imprint on the institutions of society, giving them their peculiar shape and »color«, as it were.

As one can see, in some of the above cases culture and religion are blended, making them almost indistinguishable. That may well make sense – depending on the force that religion had or continues to have within the civilization in question. But does it make sense to speak of Japanese modernity as distinct from Western modernity? I doubt it. There are undeniably differences between contemporary Japan and contemporary Western countries, as much as there are many such differences between any group of countries originating from, or belonging to, other civilizations. The trouble with much of the multiple modernities literature is that it does

not really tell us a great deal about what precisely these differences consist in, how significant they are and why they might justify speaking of modernity in the plural. But we need to know this to judge whether Japan – or whichever region or country one may consider – is *so* unique as to justify, perhaps even warrant, the conceptualization of its institutional and cultural outlook in its own, and, what is more, even in *civilizational* terms – so different that something very important would be missed if Japan were treated as one of several members of a common family of modern societies. Is that really the case? For instance, is Japan significantly *more* different from Spain than Denmark or Britain or Greece are? And does contemporary Japan have more in common with *pre-modern* Japan than with, say, *contemporary* Canada or Germany?

Questions such as these would have to be answered in the affirmative to justify the language of multiple *modernities*, rather than varieties of *modernity*. If one accepts the premise that the breakthrough to modernity is a genuinely revolutionary process, matched in historical significance only by the Neolithic revolution, then one would probably be hard put to accept such views. My own guess is that the answers depend on what precisely is being compared across two or more social entities (which need not be states). The multiple modernities literature, however, does not even permit posing such questions as the very premises on which it rests imply that there *must* be greater variance across civilizational lines than across time, than across epochs in world history. And given that almost everyone agrees that modern society, be it in the singular or in the plural, differs from pre-modern societies, the *assumed* differences between the newly discovered multiple modernities must be very profound indeed. For if they were not, then there would be no sound basis for speaking of modernity in the plural – of modernities.

Defenders of the notion of multiple modernities might reply that I read too much into their accounts and that their aim is simply to highlight cultural differences that are easily missed when approaching the whole world as one, which modernization theory seems to do. But while it may well be that modernization theorists have a tendency to *underrate* existing differences, we should also guard against *overrating* them.

I will now give a brief outline of an alternative approach that, while permitting us to speak of modernity in the singular, at the same time leaves ample room for considering whichever differences between countries or world regions we have reason to emphasize.

### 3. Varieties of Modernity

As indicated above, I believe a better alternative to accommodate whichever differences may exist between different modern societies would be a concept of varieties of modernity. The main source of inspiration for this proposal is the new political economy literature on »varieties of capitalism« (Hall/Soskice 2001; Streeck/Yamamura 2001). Like the multiple modernities literature, it emphasizes difference. However, the differences that it concerns itself with are seen as *family differences* within a common mode of societal (more specifically, economic) organization, that of modern capitalism. Moreover, they are first and foremost *institutional* differences, not cultural ones, even though their socio-historical embeddedness in particular cultural and political contexts is well traced and acknowledged. And finally, they *cut across* civilizational lines.

Two main varieties of capitalism are discussed in this literature: »liberal« capitalism, exemplified most clearly by the Anglo-American brand of capitalism, on the one hand, and »coordinated« or »non-liberal« capitalism, of which Germany and Japan are taken to be the prime examples, on the other. The differences that exist between them, as well as the comparative advantages/disadvantages they involve, are analyzed at great length, but need not interest us here. What makes this literature useful for present purposes is that it permits us to take existing differences seriously without giving them too much weight.

Interestingly, the approach also leads to a regrouping of countries – one that plausibly suggests there are several Western countries whose peculiar setup of *economic* institutions makes them more similar *in this respect* to an important Asian country, or civilization, than to several of their Western counterparts. Similar findings would likely emerge if one extended the analysis to other institutional sectors of society, such as various modern societies' *social policy regimes*, their *political systems*, and others. Again, one could ask questions such as, is the Japanese welfare state more similar to that of Switzerland, the United States, and Great Britain, as their common subsumption under the »liberal« regime type in Esping-Andersen's work would imply (see Esping-Andersen 1990), or does it have more in common with either the German variant (on which it was initially modeled to a certain extent) on the one hand, and the East Asian »tigers« (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong) on the other, as suggested by the literature on Confucian welfare capitalism (eg, Jones 1993)? Or how about Hong Kong's very liberal, *laissez-faire* capitalism? How much of its brand of welfare capitalism is peculiarly »Asian« or »East Asian«, and how much does it owe to imported Western models? Are the strongly familist and productivist orientations of East Asian welfare systems (Holliday 2000) regional peculiarities, reflecting deeply rooted cultural dispositions, or rather elements of a universal policy mix whose particular configuration and weight depends on political contingen-

cies (such as the strength of labor movements), the stage of development (Hort/Kuhnle 2000), and other factors? Next, we may look at Japanese – or South Korean, or Indian, or Chilean, or whichever – democracy. Are they all categories of their own or just particular variants of the three or four basic models of democracy found elsewhere in the world?

What these few remarks suggest is that we must be very precise in our comparative analyses and that it is helpful to go beyond the study of vaguely defined cultures and civilizations and their historical rootedness. Of course we want to know how history and culture shape our institutions, but we should also be interested in analyzing their concrete form and functioning. Or to put it differently, what does it mean to say that South Africa or Brazil constitute different modernities, rather than different varieties, or different stages in the realization, of a common modern condition?

Consider, for example, the field of *science*. Does it take on a radically different shape in India or Egypt than, say, in Italy or the Netherlands? The likely answer is that it depends on what one focuses on. If one focuses on the benchmarks used to measure the quality of output, then these will either be very much the same everywhere or marginalize countries opting for more parochial standards. If, on the other hand, one were to focus on questions such as the organization of access to positions in the science sector, then one would probably find that this is more open (i.e., more based on purely technical criteria, signifying a higher degree of functional differentiation in the structure of society at large) in one group of countries than it is in another, and it may well be that there is a link between the two aspects as indicated by the success of the American science system which appears to be the most open in the world. Recognizing this link, other countries may (gradually) follow suit. Or lose out.

Another example is *medicine* and the perceptions, rules and norms guiding medical practice. If they are, for all their local peculiarities, not radically different in non-Western societies from those prevailing in the West, and if whichever differences remain have more to do with different economic capabilities than with fundamentally different conceptions of medicine, then what does this signify for notions of separate modernities? Why rule out the possibility that some societies are less modern than others, or are not (yet?) equally modernized throughout the entire structure of society? And again, it would be hard to find institutional sectors of society not raising such questions.

Wittrock has rightly pointed out that even western Europe has become fully modern in certain respects only very recently. Thus, it took until the mid-1970s before Greece, Portugal and Spain finally switched to democracy, and until the 1990s before the last hurdle to universal suffrage was removed in the last Swiss canton. Why should similar points not hold for other regions, other societies, as

well; across the board or in particular fields? In many African states and in much of South Asia girls are still systematically excluded from formal education, receive less health care than boys, and are generally considered less socially worthy than their male counterparts due to the persistence of pre-industrial (agrarian) value systems, as well as social structures supporting them (Drèze/Sen 1995). Are we to ignore that? If, on the other hand, a comparative analysis suggested a gradual (slow, uneven, often conflictual but nevertheless discernable) trend toward greater inclusion of females into the main institutional sectors of society around the world, then what would that imply? That other fields, in which more difference may prevail, are more important to determine the character of a given society? I doubt that such a claim could withstand critical scrutiny.

Another potentially damaging issue is the following. The differences highlighted in the multiple modernities literature are almost always differences located at the cross-national or cross-civilizational level. However, we do find quite significant – even cultural – differences at the sub-national level as well. For instance, Putnam (1993), amongst several others, has demonstrated that there continue to be dramatic differences in economic and political performance between northern and southern Italy, rooted in deep-seated social structural and cultural differences which in turn have been differently conducive to the development of a full-blown capitalist economy and a well functioning democratic polity. Similar differences have been observed in India, especially between Kerala, arguably the state that has gone furthest in dismantling pre-capitalist and semi-feudal structures of economic organization, and much of the rest of the country, resulting amongst others in levels of literacy and life expectancy that outperform not only those of all other Indian states, but also those of many economically more advanced countries in Latin America (Heller 1999). Are these differences less significant than those existing between, say, Singapore and Luxembourg or Taiwan and Portugal – as one might be led to believe by a civilization-centered approach of multiple modernities? If yes, why? If no, does that mean that even single nation states may contain different (»multiple«) modernities within their borders? Or what does it mean instead? Why give so much weight to cross-national or cross-civilizational differences in the first place? The multiple modernities literature offers no compelling answers to questions such as these.

We should also not reject modernization theory's claims about homogenizing trends leading to convergence prematurely. If we define convergence carefully enough and avoid equating it with identity, then we may detect trends of convergence even in the very fields that the multiple modernities literature believes lend the strongest support to its premises: culture and politics. To begin with the first, consider the work of Ronald Inglehart and others drawing upon the World Values Survey. This work suggests, says Inglehart (1995: 381), »that economic modernization and cultural modernization tend to go together in coherent syndromes« around

the world and that the more fundamental differences in worldviews are not among industrialized societies but rather between pre-industrial and industrial societies. Likewise, empirical work using the framework of the world polity theory of John Meyer and others (eg, Meyer et al. 1997) suggests that a world society organized around key structural commonalities is emerging due to the rapid spread of a global culture encouraging the adoption of similar institutions across the globe. At the same time, we have good reason to believe that several of the tendencies that we now identify with Western modernity have only recently become widespread even in the West. For instance, Beck's work on »reflexive modernization« (1986) has shown that individualization became a mass phenomenon in Germany only beginning in the 1960s – with the onset of the so-called economic miracle; similar observations have since been made about other Western countries. It has often been noted that »Asians'« worldviews, personalities, value systems are less individualistic than those of Westerners, and that their everyday moralities tend to be more community-oriented, more collectivist. But the West's everyday morality was not much different in the past (Phillips 1993). Can we rule out with certainty the possibility that today's so-called »Asian values« are more reminiscent of Europe's morality of yesterday (Senghaas 1998) than reflections of deep-seated civilizational differences that are here to stay forever? After all, East Asia – the first non-Western region in the world to become fully modern (Tu 2000) – began to modernize much later than the West. It would therefore not be surprising if many of the phenomena that we associate with modernity were to manifest themselves there later; and there are indeed signs that this is precisely what is happening.

How do such findings square with the notion of multiple modernities? If one cannot simply dismiss them as invalid, one must at least address the questions they raise for our understanding of modernity or modernities. But the literature on multiple modernities thus far does not appear to be taking notice of such ephemeral phenomena.

Another seeming point of convergence is in the field of economics where policies are becoming increasingly more similar. Not only are there many more democracies in the world now than there were 50 years ago, but growing emphasis is also placed on the establishment of market economies. »As late as 1965«, writes Jeffrey Sachs (2000: 38f.), only the West, Japan and the four East Asian »tigers« (together representing just 21 percent of the world's population) were thoroughly »capitalist in orientation«. With the collapse of socialism, the opening up of India and other transitions elsewhere, the picture has been rapidly changing over the course of the past 15 years or so. Now, the majority of the world's population lives either under capitalist economic institutions or in countries moving toward their introduction and consolidation. The outcomes of these transformations are anything but certain.

Nor are they painless. Yet, it is hard to deny that they indicate some movement in common directions, reducing divergence across countries or civilizations.

Globally, this process has enormous implications. One of them seems to be the reversal of a trend of growing economic inequality between world regions that began roughly two centuries ago with the industrialization of Europe and now seems to have reached a turning point, leading to a new geography of inequality due to the increasing economic potency of late industrializing countries, especially of China (Firebaugh 2003). China's phenomenal rise over the past quarter century has not only been the key force behind reducing the world's poverty level from more than half of all people 50 years ago to roughly 20 percent of the world population today, it also means that, for the first time in human history, a majority of the world's population will soon live under genuinely modern conditions. China is modernizing more rapidly than any other country in the world has ever before, and its modernization will very likely change the world's face radically. The country will soon outperform Germany as the third largest economy, and it will eventually become the world's number one. As a result, it will also become politically more powerful. And even though it will in many ways remain different from the contemporary West, it will also become more like it in numerous respects. For instance, we do not of course know whether China will ever switch to a democratic political system, and even if it does, the kind of democracy it may establish can differ significantly from Western-type democracies. But it is already in the process of strengthening the legal-bureaucratic type of political authority which Weber believed to be an indispensable prerequisite of successful economic modernization, and if eventually it were to adopt a genuine form a democracy, then modernized China would over time become more similar to the West. Restrictions on the freedom of thought and opinion, as well as that of science, while far from negligible, have already been eased and will likely be further eased, even though setbacks are always possible. In 2004 China amended its constitution to grant a formal right to ownership of private property, an institution without historical roots in Chinese culture, but needed to fuel the private business sector driving China's economic growth. Again, the trends speak for growing convergence.

One could go on like this, but the point I have been trying to make should be clear enough by now. So what are we to make of it? It is this question to which I shall now turn by way of a brief conclusion.

#### 4. Conclusion

There are many differences between different localities in the world: between villages, towns, cities, provinces, countries, regions, civilizations, and none of the foregoing is meant to deny them. It is, however, to say that the more fundamental differences are between modern and pre-modern social entities, not among modern ones. The multiple modernities approach is ill equipped to recognize the revolutionary shift to the modern age, tracing, as it does, the presumably more profound differences between civilizations to the Axial Age some 2500 years ago whose religious, epistemic and cultural transformations are believed to transcend the modern and the pre-modern eras and hence to go deeper, to have a more significant and lasting impact on contemporary societies' identity or outlook than their lesser or greater degrees of modernization. If they did not, then the very rationale for a civilization-centered approach would collapse.

I think such an approach is both conceptually flawed and empirically dubious, and that a better alternative to accommodate existing differences in the contemporary world would be a yet-to-be-developed concept of »varieties of modernity«, akin to, but naturally pitched at a higher level of abstraction than, the notion of »varieties of capitalism« emerging from the new political economy literature. Such an approach would allow us to take differences seriously, but it would have to go beyond culture and politics, the two main fields of investigation in the multiple modernities school, as well as the economy, on which the varieties of capitalism literature focuses for evident reasons. It would, in fact, have to examine the entire structure of society, all aspects of modern life and all institutional sectors. Moreover, rather than singling out a few countries for comparative analyses, it would have to cover the whole world.

It would therefore (have to) be much more comprehensive than either of the above approaches. The across-the-board comparisons that it would encourage raise the possibility that some countries – or other social entities – are in certain respects more similar to ones belonging to other civilizations than they are to several members of their »own« and vice versa. The notion of multiple modernities suggests homogeneity within civilizations; at least more so than across civilizations. The notion of varieties of modernity raises doubts as to the soundness of this proposition, because, following the varieties of capitalism literature, it focuses on institutions, and these have already been shown to cut across civilizational boundaries in some important instances. And while it cannot be known ahead of time whether this applies to all other sets of societal institutions as well, one should also not simply take the existence and persistence of difference for granted.

To be able to speak of varieties of modernity, one would have to find clusters of modern societies with coherent patterns of institutional co-variation, such that a

particular type of modernity that scored high on one variable of institutional design would also have to score high on another. Now, given the breadth of the proposed approach, putting it to work may prove a task of such stupendous proportions that it cannot actually be accomplished, at least not by a single researcher or even a sizeable group of researchers. But that need not invalidate the idea behind the proposal. For regardless of its feasibility, the mere consideration of its conceptual and methodological prerequisites suggests a lot about the kind of knowledge needed to support the notions of either multiple modernities or varieties of modernity. Both terms make sense only if coherent patterns of the above kind can be firmly established for particular clusters of modern societies. For only then would something very important be missed about the societies in question by forbearing any sub-categorization whatsoever and referring to them indiscriminately as modern societies or just calling them by names of geographical or political origin (such as East Asia or Japan).

There is of course the possibility that careful analysis would ultimately lend support to a civilization-centered approach of multiple modernities because whichever varieties of modernity such an analysis may yield turn out to be strongly correlated with cultural factors of the sort alluded to in this literature. Conversely, it is equally possible that both terms have to be discarded because beyond a number of core institutions such as those pertaining to the economy, the political order or the legal framework, modern societies simply do not form coherent clusters. In that case, our conceptualization efforts would have to target lower levels of aggregation and content themselves with labels such as »varieties of capitalism«, rather than varieties of modernity.

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