Rethinking Modernity

Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination

**1) Modernity, Colonialism, and the Postcolonial Critique**

In her book, Gurminder K.Bhambra critically explores the myths on which European modernity rests. Her main argument is that modernity should be seen in plural as ‘modernities’ rather than attributing it solely to the West.

In this chapter she discusses the emergence of Subaltern Studies in India as a voice of the marginalized Others and as a way of reclaiming their subjectivities that were disdained by the colonial discourse of modernity. The author argues that colonialism, both as a discourse and a conquest, produced the domination of the Other and imposed new social forms and cognitive categories on the colonized Others. A good example of that is ‘schooling’ adopted in most newly independent countries. Such education adopted the language, the premises and the way of thinking brought by the colonizer. One may also add another more tangible example: the urban planning of cities which imitates the European model. The author claims that this modernity is actually a “subjugation of minds as well as bodies”.

However, the main point of this argument is not to oppose the East and West and thus reproduce the same essentialist narratives created once by Europe. Some theorists like Césaire, Nandy, Memmi believe that the colonial order should be abolished not only to liberate the colonized but to free the colonizer from the hegemonic colonial culture that was once (and is still today) guiding the colonial discourse.

A good illustration of the colonial discourse is the belief that Europe would bring progress and development to the rest of the world. It is the civilizational mission or the burden of the white man. The fallacy of such premises is that the colonizer never asked the question whether the Other was willingly sharing or accepting such projects. African people, for example, were forced to adopt European modernity even if it had no sense at all to the African culture and history.

Today, the author argues, and after decades of independence, we should critically understand how knowledge is produced. We need to examine the import of colonial practices and thoughts in order to invent an authentic modernity that reflects the local culture and history.

India is studied by the author to prove the dominance of European modernity. British theorists who paved the way to colonial rule in India believed that a civilization is deemed sophisticated when it owns written history and when it rests on reason. India, according to them, does not have these two prerequisites and, therefore, needs to learn from the British model. India for these theorists India is like a child who needs to grow intellectually to gain maturity. Such maturity goes through three stages: the Hindu golden age, the Muslim period of decline and the British liberation of India from (alien) Muslim rule. “The British were thus able to subsume the diversity of Indian pasts under ‘a homogenizing narrative of transition from medieval period to modernity”(p. 24). “The future for India, her transition to the ‘modern’, was a known history, something which has already happened elsewhere and was now simply to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content”(p. 24).

Such perception of history was shaping the mind of the colonialists who believed that all nations should learn from the European model and imitate it in all matters be them political, cultural or economic.

The counter narrative that ‘subaltern studies’ suggest is rather to break with this colonial historiography and give a voice to the subalterns who are all the marginalized voices in society. The subaltern is extended to refer to subordination in terms of caste, gender, language and culture. However, one should not commit the same error of the colonial essentialist discourse which believed that a sophisticated European model is universal enough to imitate. The author suggests “connected histories” that break with colonial universalism and even subjective localism. It favours dialogue and the recognition of difference. This is what Edward Said points to when he argues that difference should connect and separate. Culture, history, reason,... are not the product of one nation or mind but a hybrid and mixed project where all nations and people contribute in different way. Paul Giltroy uses the metaphor of the ship that used once to transport slaves to America and how the same Black people enriched America with the culture and arts they brought with them from Africa. The ship (plane, the Internet) could become the symbol of mobility between places and people and thus overcome boundaries.

Conclusion

The main argument of this chapter is to challenge the colonial hegemonic discourse of modernity and to highlight the active right and legitimacy of the subalterns in producing their own versions of modernities.

2) **European Modernity and the Sociological Imagination**.

European modernity emerged in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries which witnessed the Enlightenment. It rested on two fundamental principles. First the assumption of a ruptural break from the past. Second, an assumption of the uniqueness of the West as a distinctive society. History was seen as proceeding in stages with the West as the highest point of development.

The Enlightenment produced by the writings and discoveries of intellectuals, such as Hobes, Locke, Bacon, Newton...promoted a scientific mindset in analyzing not only nature but also society. Thanks to this new way of thinking, the political and social realm should be investigated through rational, scientific methods. Religion and the Church were thus challenged and lost their monopoly of knowledge.

In this period nature was considered a transparent book to read and translate. Researchers succeeded to produce a cartography of the cosmos and the compass helped navigators to discover new continents. Knowledge was also acquired through empirical research and the accumulation of data. Reason was expected to liberate man from superstition.

The development of societies was explained according to the stages theory of history. These ‘societies undergo development through successive stages based on different modes of subsistence’. These stages were generally understood as being from hunting and gathering, to pastoral, to settled agriculture, and to commerce (p.37). The societies that reached the commercial stage (in this case the European society) was deemed fit enough to progress and reach higher levels of development in different fields and therefore to become a model for less developed societies that are still stuck in previous stages (pastoral, agricultural).

The stages theory of history was also expanded to slavery. Thinkers of the eighteenth century considered slavery a practice that was common in ancient times, like in the Greek and Roman periods, and was still common even in the eighteenth century. They would justify or explain slavery as an expression of how some societies progressed while others did not. This theory was also applied to justify the sophisticated level the commercial Western society reached and how slavery would consequently be abolished. Slavery can be abolished only if less developed societies abandon their traditional social structures and adopt the modern model. Science was then employed in the service of future colonial theories that justify Western supremacy.

The commercial society favoured the accumulation of wealth and freedom. Individuals, through hard work, could improve their life standard. This allowed them to enjoy freedom in choosing and changing their occupation, their way of life, etc.

The commercial and civilized society was one in which property was secure, industry encouraged and in which the arts were able to flourish. All these positive gains were possible because the society rests on forms of organization and the establishment of rules and regulations to protect individuals from chaos and disorder.

The theory of progressive history was then based on the belief that all societies have to go through the same process. ‘The existence of a rational order underpinning the social realm and a common humanity were the two assumptions which provided the basis for their belief that all nations were ‘destined to pass through the same successive stages of development’ (p.44-45).

The European society witnessed some political upheavals that disrupted the old order and required a new modern order. The French revolution (1789) was an illustration of such a transformation. Here again science was expected to resolve social and political problems as it did in the realm of nature. In this context ‘Comte believed that history was governed by the progressive shifts from one type of knowledge system to another – the theological, the metaphysical, the scientific – with each developing out of that which preceded it’ (p. 47).

According to this theory of social science all societies have to go through the same patterns, and humans should learn from the previous stage to build a better new one. Science and reason were the fundamental guides in this continuous and progressive evolution of man and society.

In the realm of politics, a ‘nation was no longer seen as ‘a legally defined unit of orders and corporations with an absolute monarch at the top’; instead it was increasingly understood to consist of various sectors that joined to form a rather complex whole’. The state was no longer associated with a figure (a monarch) but with people who were considered a nation. Modernity here again modified politics and the structure of political order.

In biology, modernist views were applied, for example, by Darwin to explain the origin and development of species. In religion, Weber ‘believed that that the distinctiveness of the West could only be understood in relation to other historically specific civilizations, be they in the past, or geographically elsewhere’ (p.52). For Weber, the break with religion and the separation of politics and Church happened first in the West.

Conclusion

The different theories produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in different fields all tempted to explain society, nature and history by having recourse to reason and science. The downside of this theoretical framework is that European modernity was deemed fit for all nations and the rest of the world had to copy the European model.

**3) From Modernization to Multiple Modernities: Eurocentrism Redux**

The idea of modernity rests on the premise that Europe is a model for the rest of the world. Even Habermas’s idea of modernity as an unfinished projects implies that ‘ideas of evolution and progress are central to the concern with the future and history of the West is seen as a precursor of the future of the non-West’(p. 56).

After World War II, the debate among the capitalist block or the communist one about under-developed countries and how these should follow a given pattern to join the ‘civilized world’. This idea was commonly referred as ‘modernization’ which actually betrayed a Eurocentric definition of history as a linear and progressive structure where some countries ( the West) are far advanced and others should follow by adopting the same track.

However, the End of the Communist regime and the rise of globalization pushed many theorists to raise the question of multiple modernities. ‘Theorists of multiple modernities situate themselves critically in relation to earlier debates on modernization, contesting the assumptions of linearity and convergence they associate with this earlier approach, and ostensibly taking into account cultural diversity in the expression of modern institutions’ (p. 58). The idea of multiple modernities challenged two fallacies. The first is the existence of only one type of modernity. The second is that of Eurocentrism.

Theorists of modernity and modernization tried to spot the specific qualities in individuals and societies which render them modern. In other words what is the modern ‘man’ and what are the traits of social and economic growth. ‘In this way, modernity was understood as a psychological syndrome as well as being recognized as a process of national development ‘(p. 60). Modernity was both associated with motivational (Man) and institutional (society) features.

Institutional measures of modernity were seen in terms of the market economy, industrialization, nation state, urbanization, ecology, literacy, social mobility, democratic participation, mass media and consumption. Theorists of modernization believed that this process will expand thanks to globalization and under-developed countries will adopt such patterns and thus all the world (global village) will be as one. This implies that history and humanity are all converging towards the same destination: western model of modernity.

Critics of this uniform, one sided definition of modernity rejected the idea that tradition is an obstacle to modernity and that one has to break with the past in order to achieve this transition. Many values in traditional societies contain the potential of growth and development. For example, modernity and tradition should not necessarily clash to produce the transition. Sometimes dialogue between the two could be very productive.

Theorists of multiple modernities argue that non western societies were witnessing some internal transformation in different fields and the encounter with the West precipitated the transition to modernity. For example, democratic practices were known in many non western societies (Shura in Islam for example) and these practices will take a new universal name (democracy) in the modern era

Conclusion

To assume that modernity authentically originated in Europe which was the ‘ideal type’ is to deny the rest of the world any agency. To believe that multiple modernities should also recognize the percussive European experience is also another fallacy. Modernity in Europe was also the result of colonization that disrupted the organic development of colonies. Therefore the true meaning of multiple modernities should rest on the right of every society and civilization to create its own version of modernity regardless of any previous model.