

European Journal of Sociology

<http://journals.cambridge.org/EUR>

Additional services for *European Journal of Sociology*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity

Sudipta Kaviraj

European Journal of Sociology / Volume 46 / Issue 03 / December 2005, pp 497 - 526

DOI: 10.1017/S0003975605000196, Published online: 16 May 2006

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0003975605000196

How to cite this article:

Sudipta Kaviraj (2005). An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity. *European Journal of Sociology*, 46, pp 497-526 doi:10.1017/S0003975605000196

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

SUDIPTA KAVIRAJ

*An Outline of a Revisionist Theory
of Modernity*

I

Outline of the theory that needs revision

WHAT THIS PAPER offers is, in a literal sense, an outline. It needs fuller theoretical elaboration (1). It also needs more detailed discussion of historical evidence. Its focus is a question usually neglected in current social theory. How should a theory of modernity cope with historical difference? My dissatisfaction with received modernisation theories has been driven by my parochial interest in Indian history, just as that theory was devised by the need to understand the equally parochial interest of making sense of primarily European history. But if modernity is viewed as a process that expands from the west to other parts of the world, this raises not merely a historical but also a theoretical question. It is certainly necessary to understand the history of modernity in other settings, but also to ask what shape should the theory assume if it is to deal with this expanding historical diversity. The original theory went through two later extensions. The first appears entirely legitimate: the application of the European theory of modernity to cover non-European societies that originated and functioned as extensions of the Western world – like Canada, America and Australia – on the partially correct ground that their social histories were sufficiently similar to Europe's. But some historical sociologists have objected to this simple transfer. S. N. Eisenstadt (2) has suggested that if we think closely about American history, we are forced to recognise the first case of emendation

(1) A very terse version of this argument was presented in my papers: Sudipta KAVIRAJ, "Modernity and politics in India", *Daedalus* (Winter 2000), and "Dilemmas of democratic development" in Adrian LEFTWICH, ed.,

Democracy and Development (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994).

(2) S. N. EISENSTADT, *Introduction*, "Multiple Modernities", *Daedalus* (Winter, 2000).

in the direction of a theory of “multiple modernities” (3): i.e., there were peculiarities in American history – colonialism, the presence of three different races, the resultant use of endemic violence against racially subordinated communities or peoples (4) – which made American modernity sufficiently different from the standard European cases to call for a serious attempt at theoretical differentiation. There was a second extension of the “European” theory of modernity which was of a very different character. This was the widespread application of this theory in the 1950s to non-European societies in the form of sociological theories of modernization, political theories of “political development” and economic theories of growth (5). To put it schematically, but not inaccurately, all these were theories of “transition”. All such theories expected societies which started their transformation towards modernity later to follow the examples and, to be more precise, the institutional forms of European history of the 19th century, especially, the manner in which social theory interpreted the history of these forms (6). To put it in Marx’s graphic phrase, modern European history showed to the societies of Asia, Africa and Latin America “the images of their future” (7).

II

The need for revision: uniformity and variation in historical thinking

The plurality of pasts

When we read these theories into the analytical work of Indian history, they gave us basically two sets of instructions: to read our past’

(3) For two early, pioneering versions of this line of reasoning, see Dileep GAONKAR, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Duke University Press, 2001) and S. N. EISENSTADT, ed., “Multiple Modernities”, *Daedalus* (Winter 2000). For a searching analysis of the common features of theories of modernity and the peculiarities of the modern in the Indian context: Rajeev BHARGAVA, “Are there alternative modernities?” in N. N. VOHRA, ed., *Culture, Democracy and Development in South Asia* (India International Centre/Shipra, Delhi, 2001, pp. 9-26).

(4) On of the most unusual and perceptive treatments of this unprecedentedness is Tocqueville’s analysis, especially the chapter on the three races of America. *Democracy in*

America, Volume I, chapter XVIII (1835-1840).

(5) The literature on modernization theory is vast, but one of the most interesting early examples of this theory can be found in Edward SHILS, *Political Development in the New States* (Paris, Mouton, 1968).

(6) This is an important question, but one that is insufficiently analysed: the difference between historians’ history and social scientists’ history; it is in its second form that European history came to assume a position of dominance over both cognition and imagination over the world.

(7) Karl MARX, *Capital*, Vol I (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969, p. 19).

own past pre-modern history; and to conceive our future in particularly implausible ways. The most extreme versions of these intellectual tendencies can be illustrated from the history of Indian Marxism (8). Some Marxists in the 1950s believed so strongly in a theory of the necessary uniformity of the sequence of social forms, that S. A. Dange wrote a book, admittedly dilettantish, purporting to show that ancient Indian society moved, single file, "from primitive communism to slavery" (9). Closer to the question of modernity, it is interesting to observe how even as innovative an historical thinker as Ranajit Guha, the founder of *Subaltern Studies*, unproblematically implies that India had a "feudal" society before the establishment of British colonialism (10). Afterwards, through the critical work of Marxist historians themselves these "uniformist" tendencies were criticised, rejected and reformulated. The works of R. S. Sharma (11) and Irfan Habib (12) proved decisively the infelicity of using the concepts of slavery and feudalism to understand Indian history. After some flirtatious use of "Indian feudalism" to incongruously suggest that what existed in India was not feudalism (13) (to call it Indian feudalism was, to say the least, a rather unhelpful way of putting it), even that was quietly abandoned. This had an important implication for studying Indian history because it suggested that the

(8) My reason for selecting the Marxist tradition of thinking in India is that it was for nearly fifty years one of the richest strands of social reflection, and that Marxists explored questions of historical method with much greater assiduity than other strands, since they claimed that what set them apart from others was precisely the scrupulous historicity of their intellectual methods. Although Indian Marxists saw this as the problem of the rise of the "social formation" of capitalism rather than the current obsession with "modernity", their questions and concerns were very similar. Indian Marxist discussions came to very similar puzzlements and points of theoretical decision, though on each occasion they seem to have taken the wrong turn.

(9) S. A. DANGE, *India: From Primitive Communism to Slavery* (PPH, Bombay, 1951). It must be noted however that it instantly drew severe strictures from one of the leading historians, D. D. Kosambi, "Marxism and ancient Indian culture", in *D.D. Kosambi on History and Society* (ed. A.J. Syed), University of Bombay, Bombay, 1965, 73-78. I offer a more detailed analysis of some these difficulties in Sudipta KAVIRAJ, "On the status of Marx's

writings on India", *Social Scientist*, N. 124 (1983).

(10) Ranajit GUHA, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (OUP, Delhi, 1983).

(11) R. S. SHARMA, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (Macmillan, Delhi, 1985).

(12) Irfan Habib's major work was *Agrarian System of Mughal India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999); but his historical research was wide-ranging and often touched on methodological questions. See Irfan HABIB, ed., *Medieval India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992).

(13) See R. S. SHARMA, *Indian Feudalism*; for a critical discussion, see also Harbans MUKHIA, "Was there feudalism in India?", *Journal of Peasant Studies* (Vol 8 [3], 1981). Only a small segment of Marxist historians found Marx's sketchy speculations about an Asiatic mode of production methodologically fruitful. For an argument in favour of the concept see Dipendra Banerjee, "Marx and the 'original' form of India's village community", in Diptendra BANERJEE, ed., *Marxian Theory and the Third World* (Sage, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 133-172).

conditions which prevailed prior to the arrival of modernity through the imperial intercession were very different from the conditions from which European modernity started (14). If (but this is a big if) it is admitted that modern institutions are determined, at least partially, by their *conditions of origin* in two senses: i.e., by the character and logic of the institutions they would replace, and also by the conditions in which modern institutions would themselves arise, it would be plausible to suggest that the heterogeneity of pre-conditions would lead to differentiations of the paths that modernity would take (15).

The plurality of futures

Social scientists concerned primarily with contemporary society, not the past, persistently faced a second difficulty. The received theory expected the processual outcomes of modernity to become increasingly uniform. Regarded very generally, this was true; but when analysed closely, this appeared increasingly doubtful. Take the institutions of the state. On one hand, it was quite clear that British colonial rule slowly introduced into Indian society a form of state power vastly different from all previous forms, despite its initial pretence of emulation of the imperial magnificence of the Mughals (16). By the middle of the 19th century it was clear that, although it was an institution of alien rule, the nature of its claims over the Indian society, its legal apparatus, its techniques of rule and its long-term purposes were qualitatively different from former empire-states. Thus the political history of India from the mid 19th century cannot be written except in terms of a story of a *modern* state. Yet, one of the modern state's principal institutions, the bureaucracy, behaved in ways very different from its European counterparts, and from the *theoretical* picture of that behaviour constructed so powerfully by the Weberian model of rational-legal authority. Under pressures of modernity, the Indian state has evidently gone through serious stages of successive institutional elaboration, but it is hard to be confident that it is coming to resemble the model of the Weberian

(14) Irfan Habib provided a magisterial survey of these conditions in a famous essay, "Potentialities of capitalistic development in the economy of Mughal India", *Enquiry* (Winter 1971, Volume 3, No. 3, pp. 1-56).

(15) I return to the two meanings of the notion of "initial conditions" in section V below.

(16) Bernard Cohn's remarkable essay "Representing authority in Victorian India" in Eric HOBBSAWM and Terence RANGER, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983) offers a fascinating account of this early strategy of symbolic emulation.

bureaucratic state (17). Secondly, the increasing success of democratic politics in India is giving rise to patterns of political conduct, trends in collective political behaviour, modes of critical thinking, and evaluative judgement that are impossible to fold back into recognisable European forms. The historical extensions of Indian democracy, while undeniably part of India's story of modernity, are tending to take unprecedented paths. Our major theoretical problem, arising out of the restrictive structure of the received theory, was simple but intractable. The easy binary distinction between "traditional" and "modern" habituated social scientists to think of these two as exclusive and exhaustive, such that any thing that was not modern was taken to be traditional. Further, when the modern was so completely equated with Western forms of politics, economy and social behaviour, this led to monstrous mis-identifications of present facts. For instance, the crowd, grime, and pace of present-day Calcutta would have to be identified as "traditional", while it was utterly and obviously modern. Thus, the theory fell increasingly into inconsistencies. To recognise the unfamiliar behaviour of Indian democracy, the unfamiliar evolutions of the Indian state, the un-Western urbanity of our cities, and surprisingly unaccustomed twists in economic behaviour, we required a theory of modernity that could cut itself from its points of origin in European history and conceive of these trends as modern.

Arguably, from an admission of these difficulties, there can be several routes, and I want to recommend only one of them. Two suggestions that would certainly obviate some of these difficulties, but seem to me to create other more intractable ones, are those that recommend indigenism or deny entirely the historical peculiarity of the modern. Some theorists conclude from these problems that we should not try to develop greater scope and complexity of the theory of modernity, but take a turn towards indigenism – to suggest that the historical trajectory of each society is incomparably peculiar, and should be analysed as far as possible by its own "internal" concepts (18). This would simply disregard the

(17) To take a telling but random example, the recent study by Vivek Chibber concludes that development policies in India foundered precisely because the actual behaviour of the Indian state was quite different from the model found in Weberian theory. Anthropologists have accumulated the most compelling evidence about the functioning of the Indian state — particularly at its lower bureaucratic levels. See for instance, the work of Barbara HARRISS WHITE, *India Working* (Cambridge University

Press, Cambridge, 2002); Akhil GUPTA, *Post-colonial Developments* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2000); Chris FULLER and Veronique BENEÏ, eds, *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India* (C. Hurst, London, 2001).

(18) I think this is a deeply problematic line of thought, though it has some superficial plausibility. To take a simple but important example, it is impossible to capture the complexities of India's democratic evolution

theory of modernity, and imply that social science in other parts of the world should ignore theories of modernity because of their European origin. Significant change in history, a second view argues, can be found at various points in history; thus, the assumption that there is something especially new in the newness of modernity is wrong. If that is true, then all historical changes that constitute parts of the narrative of the change into modernity can be explained by a general theory of historical change; we do not need a specific, chronologically parochial “theory of modernity”. It is impossible to present the arguments against these two positions in this paper (although I believe it is important to produce arguments against them, and not to dismiss them simply because they represent the views of a statistical minority in modern social science).

III

Disaggregating the general theory of modernity

In what follows, I shall talk about Marx and Weber as the main examples of the most ambitious and influential theory of modernity. I do not intend to deny the serious differences between Marx and Weber; but there is something shared between them, which can be called a logical figure, a broad form or shape common to their theories within which their differences are housed. At the most general and abstract level, the “common theory” can be seen to consist of two large proposals about modern history (19). The *first thesis* states that the transformation of European societies was not just another instance of usual historical change; it was a new kind of newness. Marx, Weber, and earlier writers like Guizot agreed that the birth of modern Europe saw the emergence of a new civilisation which altered the relations of forces between the various cultures or civilisations of the world. This thesis is mainly

through indigenous concepts, simply because traditionally India did not have any political ideal or institutional practice seriously comparable to modern democracy. There were some attempts by Indian nationalist writers to prove the existence of a genealogy of democracy in India, but their results were, not surprisingly, wholly unconvincing. For two examples, see the 19th century arguments by the Bengali thinker, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay in *Samajika Prabandha*, and Radhakumud Mukherjee. Ironically, their own evidence proves beyond

doubt that the political arrangements they were celebrating had a distant allegorical or rhetorical relation to modern democratic principles.

(19) A very brief version of this argument can be found in my earlier paper, “Modernity and Politics in India”, *Daedalus* (Winter 2000). But the first part of the argument is too terse; its main theses are illustrated through an historical discussion about modern Indian political life.

inward looking, comparing modern Europe with previous European social forms. There is a *second thesis* that was, in a strict sense, absent from the work of earlier thinkers like Kant, Hegel or Guizot and really emerged in the works of Marx and Weber. In these earlier thinkers there was certainly a vivid sense of the growing superiority of the newly emergent European civilisation, often so strong that it affected the linguistic usage of the term “civilisation”. Before this conceptual and theoretical change, the European Christian civilisation was contrasted to others like the Islamic, Chinese or Hindu (20); but after this change, European self-definition altered this usage crucially, and contrasted the *civilised* society of Europe with other societies which were rude (including those which would have been regarded as different civilisations before) or where civilisation was merely rudimentary or clearly inferior (21).

This move achieved two changes simultaneously – both in the direction of losing differentiation and towards homogeneity. First, this encouraged a falsely homogeneous picture of modern European civilisation. Second, correspondingly, using this contrast as a major characteristic, it produced a falsely homogeneous picture of other civilisations by emphasising their “rudeness” – i.e., pre-modernity (22). By this conceptual re-description, this new theory recast the relation between Europe and other parts of the world. Europe now contained a new kind of civilisation that was universalistic in several ways. It was based on universal principles in two senses. First, they were based on and justifiable by appeals to rules of a universal reason; and secondly, as a corollary, its achievements could be in principle achieved by all other human societies. This was accompanied by a strong belief that as reason and enlightenment spread across the world, these achievements – both practical and moral – would be owned by other peoples and realised in their societies. Modernity would thus be a universal civilisation, and the rest of the world was now seen as future recipients of this civilisation of modernity. In the works of Marx and Weber this rather general historical expectation was given more explicit and theoretical form.

(20) Of course, in earlier thought, these civilizations all centred on their main religions, which were perceived by European Christian thinkers as based on erroneous principles. Since Islam existed in close and hostile proximity, it was selected for special denunciation. But these were seen as different, if competing civilisations, all the same.

(21) See for instance, Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* in which Brahmins and Mandarins at times dispute the central principles of life with a representative of the West.

(22) See, for the new usage, discussions about other societies in the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers like Adam Ferguson. The emergence of a “stage” theory of history, which connects the rise of a commercial society with general pacification and a cultivation of manners, as opposed to the violent volatility of military societies, helps this transformation of a picture, which placed societies horizontally in terms of difference, to a new picture, which placed them vertically in terms of “progress”.

This common theory reflected with greater accuracy the new relation of power that had emerged between modern Europe and its colonial possessions. By the end of the 19th century the theory had two parts: the first provided a “theory” of the causes, present character and probable future trends of modernity in Europe; the second offered a *hypothesis* that this form had the power to destroy earlier social forms in the rest of the world and install a universal social form. I wish to suggest that we should accept the first part of this theory because, between its many versions – from Hegel down to Foucault, Western social theory is still answering those questions – it provides powerful, rich and still evolving conceptions of modern European history. However, in the light of our constant difficulties, we should reject the second part suggesting an easy diffusionist teleology, and install in its place a theory which holds that there is a logic of self-differentiation in modernity. The more modernity expands and spreads to different parts of the world the more it becomes differentiated and plural. To invoke Dipesh Chakravarty’s phrase, Europe can be “provincialised” (23) only if we recognise that although its origins were certainly European, modernity’s subsequent global expansion forces it increasingly to leave behind and forget its origins.

In fact, the two sub-theories that the common theory housed within itself were of quite different character. The first theory was working on actual historical evidence, and applied casts of interpretative/explanatory understanding on an historical process *after the fact*. The second theory contained a body of hypothetical ideas about the expected transformation of non-European societies, where the processes of modernity had not yet begun: the theorisation was therefore *prognostic* and primarily speculative. It extrapolated trends from the European case to other cultures, without close inspection of what actually happened when modernity began to appear in these social contexts. The two theories, though plausibly connected by an abstract frame of expectation, were really of rather different kinds, based on different kinds of evidence and followed different methods of reasoning.

Structure and history in Marx’s thought: the idea of “trajectories”

In one sense, the kind of thinking I am proposing is not altogether new. Antecedents of this form of analysis can be found in the classical theories, though, for understandable reasons, these remained mere

(23) Dipesh CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2002).

sketches, and were not elaborated at full length. In all three significant thinkers of historical modernity, traces of such analyses about varying forms and trajectories can be found (24). I shall illustrate this by analysing some parts in Marx's writings on capitalism, and then make a case that we should take up that strand, and develop it in the case of non-European cultures (25).

Two types of theoretical arguments can be found in Marx's sprawling works on the rise of capitalism. It is well known that the precise methods of analysis differ between Marx's economic and political writings. When commenting on the constant ebb and flow of politics – in France or Germany (26) – he maintains an *historicist* method (27) of describing events which are unique in their agents, in the forces which act in them, and in their historical outcomes. Although there are attempts, particularly when dealing with Germany, to discern a long-term pattern (28) there is a sense that the fluctuations of political life are too sudden and chaotic to plot onto serene designs of progress. When writing about economic life, by contrast, Marx's mode of presentation is predominantly *structural*, delineating in persistent detail the fundamental arrangement of relationships in the capitalist economy,

(24) In de Tocqueville's case, the question of difference and similarity with Europe is raised clearly in the comparison with America. In case of Weber too there are his interesting reflections on the possibility of representative politics in Russia, see Max WEBER, *Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994).

(25) In the Marxist tradition, some of these ideas were seen and developed by subsequent thinkers, simply because, as Marxism spread to other parts of Europe, its practitioners faced problems in principle similar to ours. Marxist writers after Marx sought to develop a theoretical understanding of this question by suggesting a theory of "combined and uneven development". These ideas were taken up not merely by Marxists who sought to explain historical events in Germany and Russia, but also in the cases of China and India. In the cases of Russia and China, the more familiar extensions are found in the works of Trotsky. In the Indian case, the first Marxist writer of note, M. N. Roy that was used a cast of argument, remarkably similar in his early work, *India in Transition (1922)*, in *Selected Works of M. N. Roy, Volume I, 1917-1922* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000).

(26) In speaking about his political writings, I have primarily his French trilogy in mind:

Class Struggles in France, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, and Civil War in France; but this can be supplemented by his early journalistic writings for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, and Engels' *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*. In fact, it appears that Marx's political commentaries hug the level of everyday change more closely, avoiding large generalisations, while Engels is more prone to higher-level sociological analyses.

(27) Historicist in the strict sense used by German thinkers like Dilthey, not in the very different sense used by Popper in his Cold War study: POPPER, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1945). In the first sense, historicism means staying away from law-like generalizations specific to natural sciences, and treating each historical situation as unique. Popper's idiosyncratic use means almost the opposite — a belief in inexorable historical teleology. Unfortunately, in much contemporary writing, the second sense has overshadowed the first.

(28) In "Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany (1851-52)", in Karl MARX and Friedrich ENGELS, *Selected Works*, Vol. I (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969).

describing its elements and the determinate relations between them to produce an invariant architecture. Sketches of historical analyses of capitalist development are interspersed throughout the argument but generally subordinated to this structural view. But if we look closely, it is possible to suggest a significant difference between the two ways of thinking about capitalism in Marx's works. Although the structural form of writing encourages a view that capitalism is a "universal form", i. e., wherever it arises, it eventually produces an economy of the same structural design, the historical analyses seem to suggest a very different implication.

If we look at Marx's understanding of the *history* of capitalism, as opposed to its *structure*, two rather different ways of thinking can be distinguished in his reflections about the evolution of capitalist social forms (29). In Marx's early writings, down to the middle period (30), there is a clear expectation that, although the capitalist mode of production emerged in different times and conditions in specific European societies, and social and political institutions associated with the rise of the capitalist economy take even more complex patterns of evolution, eventually all societies tend historically towards a single structural form in which social relations are commoditized or become, in some sense, abstract and commodity-like (31). It is possible then to extend this in Lukacs's style to conceive of a necessary pattern of interconnected structures of capitalist economy, bureaucratized states, market-dominated cultures, nuclear families – all as part of a global design of modernity. The rise of capitalism therefore meant the establishment of a similar kind of society in all European countries (32). In later writings,

(29) Also in the case of Marx, as with others, interpretative accounts often pursue a false ideal of excessive consistency. Readers of Marx would detect that there were rather different strands of thinking. However, instead of looking at and pursuing the implications of them all, they would think that their interpreters' responsibility was to reduce the thought of a major writer to a consistent whole, and thus excise the elements they consider less important or promising. This is an instance of a much more general tendency in reading social theory that Quentin Skinner observed and criticised a long time ago: Q. SKINNER, "Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas", *History and Theory*, 8 (1969) and in *Regarding Method* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002).

(30) In the early writings, like the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx does not

enter into extended historical analyses; but his view of capitalist development till the writing of the *Grundrisse* appears to support the idea of a single structural pattern.

(31) More than in Marx, the theory of this kind of thinking can be found in texts like LUKACS's essay on "Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat", *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin, London, 1971); and it is not surprising, as Habermas demonstrates, that Lukacs's theorizing is deeply influenced by the Weberian conception of a rationalization process. See HABERMAS, *A Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume I, Chapter IV, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986).

(32) The *Communist Manifesto*, for instance, does not hesitate to advance an abstract argument of this kind which suggests the production of historical uniformities. Clearly, this is also the unavoidable implication of the famous

Marx takes an increasingly more complex view about this historical question; and it appears that, instead of a belief in an equi-final trajectory of capitalist evolutions, it moves towards a more plural vision of historical paths. Finally, this perception led to the well-known distinction in the final chapters of *Capital I* and parts of *Capital III* between the “first way” of capitalist development, which Marx designates as “really revolutionary”, and a separate path designated as “late capitalism” in which both the purely economic logic of capitalist evolution of the economy and associated sociological and political transformations settle into a distinctive “second way” (33). In the “first way”, capitalism drives forward the political forces of democracy; in the second, it retards and obstructs them (34). If we read this division in European modernity not as a partial and temporary obstruction but as a dynamic pattern, we arrive at an interesting theoretical conclusion (35). At least by implication, this is then the beginning of a theory of “multiple modernities” within the Western world itself, and inside the canonical traditions of Western social theory. This would suggest that although the impulses towards a capitalist economy, urbanisation, and political democracy are all general tendencies in the history of modern Europe, there are different configurations of their complex figuration, and even differential *trajectories* within the history of European modernity.

It is this second theory in Marx which seems to have more explanatory power in understanding the modern history of Europe. Paths of German, Italian and Russian modernity, taken in this wider and more

remark in the *Grundrisse* that the shape of a more advanced society shows to the more backward the image of its future: Karl MARX, *Grundrisse*, transl. Martin Nicolaus (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973).

(33) Karl MARX, *Capital, Volume III* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971, p. 334); and generally, Chapter XX, “Historical facts about merchant’s capital”. This argument is linked to the historical analyses in *Capital I*, chapters 26-32. This insight later produced a large literature that discussed questions of “combined and uneven development”. That literature was primarily interested in the political implications of this “second way” development, and its effect on the prospects of democracy. Here I am more concerned with a methodological question about patterns of reading history.

(34) Arguments of this kind can be found in the political writings which compare the paths of Germany and France: MARX and ENGELS, *Articles from the Neue Rheinische Zeitung*,

1848-49 (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972), and Engels’s *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*, in Karl MARX and Friedrich ENGELS, *Selected Works*, Vol I (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1942).

(35) Some later Marxists, including Trotsky and Lenin, saw this as a crucial insight and tried to develop a systematic view of combined and uneven development. This put together an interesting complex picture of how a capitalist form evolves, subject simultaneously to a process towards differentiation and a contrary process of combination. Unfortunately, when Marxists sought to think about non-European societies, they made only perfunctory uses of this insight, and did not try to develop the full implications of this line of reasoning. Liberal ideas about politics were, on the whole, far less interested in comparative sociology, and usually proceeded from exclusively *normative* rather than *historical* models.

complex sense, diverged significantly from the earlier English and French trajectories (36), and led to an immense historical conflict in Europe about which of these could establish itself as dominant and “universal”, until this contest was decided by the violence of the second world war. This will also lay to rest the unconvincing idea of a spontaneous combustion of democracy in all European cultures that pervades the less historically sensitive version of social science common sense. Drawing on this alternate theory, we can ask: if the history of the West itself shows a tendency for forms of modernity to diffract, how can we reasonably expect them to be homogeneous when modernity goes out of the frame of European history into other continents and cultures (37). Let me make this point independently of Marx’s theory.

IV

Two views of Western modernity

Symmetry and sequence

Theorists who analyse modern European history acknowledge that the phenomenon called modernity is not a single, homogeneous process, but a combination of several which can be isolated and distinguished. When we are talking about modernity, we are talking about a number of processes of social change which can be studied or analysed independently of each other – such as, capitalist industrialisation, the increasing centrality of the state in the social order (Foucault’s “governmentality”), urbanisation, sociological individuation, secularisation in politics and ethics, the creation of a new order of knowledge, vast changes in the organisation of family and intimacy, and changes in the fields of artistic and literary culture (38). If modernity is shown to be analytically

(36) Although there were enormously significant differences between the guiding political imaginaries in the French republican and the Anglo-American traditions of political action. See, Charles TAYLOR, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, Durham, 2004).

(37) In the last sections of his *Modern Social Imaginaries* (“Provincializing Europe”) Charles Taylor raises this point with great persuasiveness (Taylor 2004).

(38) It is quite interesting that practically every single separate process in this complex has been given its “proper” theory — Smith and Marx on industrialisation, Guizot and Foucault on what is now called governmentality, Weber on rationalisation of bureaucracy and secularisation, Tocqueville on democracy, Toennies on individuation, supplemented by various theories of the city, of modern art and the novel, gleaned from the works of Baudelaire, Benjamin, Bakhtin and many others.

decomposable into these constituent processes, that raises a further and crucial question: how should we view the relationship among them?

Broadly, there are two ways of answering this question, which I shall designate as “theories” of *symmetry* and *sequence*. The conventional theory that dominates the common sense of social science accepts the *symmetrical* view. It suggests, first, that these separate processes are linked by a *functional* relation of interdependence, and second, in consequence, these processes develop *symmetrically*.

Functionalist conceptions of modernity

To put it schematically, if modernity consists of five distinct isolable processes, say A, B, C, D and E, this theory holds that they are *functionally dependent* on each other, i.e., either all of them would emerge, evolve and survive interdependently, or none at all. Besides, the emergence of *any one* or more of these constituents creates conditions for the emergence of the others, leading eventually to the establishment of the whole constellation. Finally, since they tend to emerge simultaneously (39), their historical development is likely to be parallel and symmetrical. In some theoretical models, as in Weber, these are all seen as instantiations of some larger, more abstract, general principle like “rationality”. The rise of a capitalist economy based on economic rationality is not accidentally related to the growth of bureaucratisation in state practices;

Curiously, the only process which is indubitably central to modernity yet without a central “high theory” is its cognitive constitution: how modernity requires a new order of knowledge from high science to everyday life.

(39) It must be noted that there can be two subsidiary models of the emergence of modern institutions according to this theory. The first possibility is that all modern processes emerge *simultaneously*, and mature together in a temporary parallel development of capitalism, democracy, individuation, secularisation etc. But there is a second possibility in which some of the more significant processes emerge first and in isolation, but subsequently create conditions for the others. It can be argued, following a particular brand of Marxism, that for technology to be disseminated through the economic realm, capitalist relations of production are necessary; these, in turn, slowly undermine family based forms of labour, and create a modern labour market of

atomistic individual proletarians. When placed in this kind of economic context, these labourers are functionally encouraged to view their selves in an atomistic manner, and would appreciate seeing this artistically reflected in the literary form of the *bildungsroman*. This concatenation can be extended and made more detailed. Lukacs’s famous reading of the expanding logic of “reification” offers a powerful picture of this kind — at least by implication. What is crucial in this view is the pressure of necessitation flowing out of one field of social activity to another: “Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat” in LUKACS, *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin, London, 1971). Equally, however, some strands in Marxist thought — like Althusser’s well-known essay on “The outline of a theory of historical time” have argued forcefully against such a presumption of simultaneity: ALTHUSSER and BALIBAR, *Reading Capital* (NLB, London, 1974).

they are deeply linked because bureaucratic rationality is simply the application of the same general rational principles to the sphere of the state's activity. The rise of secular ethics, or the decline of religious culture in spheres of social and family life, can then be seen as being related to this process, as a further instance of a general, comprehensive "rationalization" of life (40). Despite the well-known differences between Marx and Weber's theoretical pictures of a capitalist society, there can be a powerful overlap. Clearly, this is precisely how the capitalist society is viewed by an influential strand in Western Marxism. Lukacs conceives of the capitalist society as an "expressive totality" in Althusser's phrase, "a circle of circles", with the principle of rationality in the axial circle at the centre of this design (41). These processes can be given separate histories, but they are not really causally separate; because of their strong functional connection, their histories are bound to be symmetrical. Early capitalist economies are found to be linked to the rise of liberal ideologies, and early impulses towards constitutionalism (anachronistically over-interpreted as democracy), the first signs of *gesellschaft*-based associationism, and experiments with state secularism. The period from the 15th to the 17th centuries is thus a period of the rise of *modernity* in the literal comprehensive sense, i.e. the simultaneous rise of all these processes, each supporting the others. It is not surprising that slowly all these interdependent processes literally mature and eventually assume the enchanting form that we recognise as advanced capitalist democracies of today, which have ended history by becoming the collective object of desire of all human beings (42).

The sequential view

This still remains the dominant view in social theory, almost a default setting to which social science literature reverts absent-

(40) There is possibly a tension between two aspects of Weber's account of capitalism. His structural picture of a capitalist modernity certainly tends towards this functional view; yet, in those writings where Weber deals with the narrower question of "historical origins" of capitalism, he is keen to bring in some element of chance, which makes possible the use of the famous "elective affinity" metaphor.

(41) LUKACS, "Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat" in *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin, London, 1971). For the criticisms see ALTHUSSER, "The mate-

rialist dialectic", *For Marx* (Allen Lane, Penguin, London, 1969).

(42) This vision of modernity dominated not merely the thinking of European intellectuals. Intellectuals in the colonies accepted this model in its entirety. Evidently, Indian intellectuals in the 1950s subscribed to a strong version of this model, shared in appropriately different languages, by liberals, Nehruvians, and Marxists alike. In fact, the entire design of the Indian constitutional structure is based on this crucial reading of how Europe became modern.

mindedly (43). Historical research about European modernity over the last few decades has moved in a different direction and calls, by implication, for a radically different theoretical model. Change in historical interpretation has been fuelled, among other things, by critical discussions on the relation between capitalism and democracy. Although conventional Marxist understanding regarded democratic institutions initially as functionally connected to the capitalist economy – as the ideal political superstructure of the capitalist mode of production – a heterodox line of thought claimed that democratic forms were not simply functional reflexes of the bourgeois economy, but political practices imposed upon a reluctant and hostile bourgeoisie by popular struggles of the working class (44). This view of a more contradictory rather than functional relation between capitalism and democracy has been subsequently widely accepted amongst historians, disrupting the benign hypothesis of capitalism inevitably creating the conditions for the growth of democratic politics. If the second view is accepted, the real history of European modernity comes out in a far more complicated way. It would then appear that the rise of capitalism was decisive and transformative for the economy precisely because of the *absence* of democracy in political life. In the absence of even rudimentary rights of resistance and legitimate protest against the intensifying demands of capitalist industrial work discipline, an unwilling and resisting peasantry, driven out of the countryside by economic distress, could be forcibly shaped into the familiar sociological form of the modern industrial proletariat. To put it schematically, the initial success of the capitalist productive organisation was due precisely to the general absence of democratic institutions. Once capitalist industry was entrenched, and had reshaped the structure of the whole European economy into a general bourgeois form, working class political movements gradually drew democratic rights as concessions from the entrepreneurial classes and political elites. To characterise democracy as a necessary functional concomitant of capitalist economy is an astor-

(43) For an excellent discussion of the intellectual origins of modernity, which acknowledges fissures in the intellectual traditions, but which tends overall to this picture, see Stephen TOULMIN, *Cosmopolis* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992). Many examples could be culled from the literature dealing with modernization of the non-Western world: one of the most succinct and in its time influential was Edward Shils, *Political Development in the New States* (Mouton, Paris, 1968).

(44) Marxist historians have asserted this point for a long time, including E.P. THOMPSON's hugely influential *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1974). But this position, again, is not incompatible with the further claim that with time, the bourgeoisie and the political elites realised the stabilising effects of workers' enfranchisement, and its salutary effects for the longevity of the capitalist economic form.

ishly rationalising and indolent way of viewing historic upheavals like the Chartist movement. It produces an ideologically rationalizing picture of capitalism as producing inevitable democratic political effects, showing it in a better light than it deserves historically (45). And it is indolent because it simply projects anachronistically into the past a state of affairs that has existed for a limited period since the 1920s (46). By the late 19th century, proletarian and lower class movements in major parts of Western Europe had secured substantial rights of political participation; and when the universal suffrage was conceded in early 20th century, the poor in industrial capitalist societies could use their votes strategically to demand and eventually achieve the structure of a welfare state. This revisionist view of the historical relation between the economic logic of capitalism and the political logic of democracy leads to two further implications.

The narrower conclusion is that instead of emerging and evolving *symmetrically*, and being related *functionally*, capitalism and democracy had a contradictory at least oppositional relation for a long period in the early history of modernity. They could only develop *sequentially*. But after the rise of democracy modified some of the worst features of early capitalist iniquity, some (but not all) western European societies developed the familiar outline of the “advanced capitalist society”, which combines the advantages of capitalist wealth and democratic freedom. According to a sequential reading of the history of Western modernity, this achievement was possible precisely because, in the West, all the different features of modern society did not emerge at the same time. These elements could not have been functionally related.

Let me show what the wider theoretical implications of this revisionist reading of history will be by taking up briefly the single example of thinking about democracy in India. In political science literature, authors often point to the existence of various *preconditions* for the success of democracy. If we turn the conditions that are known to have existed at the time of the rise of European democracy, and treat them as *pre-conditions* for all other subsequent cases, the explanation of the sheer existence of Indian democracy becomes inordinately difficult. The conditions under which democracy arises in the West and in India are different in several significant respects.

(45) What is more important for our purpose is that it raises the unfounded expectation that rising capitalist classes acquire a constitutional hunger for democracy, and always seek democratic rather than authoritarian political solutions – an expectation the

new bourgeoisie in the Third World have signally failed to meet.

(46) Interestingly, Marx’s own analyses of the Chartist movement registers these contradictions: MARX and ENGELS, *Articles on Britain* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971).

1. In the West real democracy came to a capitalist society which was already economically converted into a capitalist form of production and already fairly wealthy in international terms of comparison (whether this was because of colonialism or not is a contested question that we can leave aside because that is irrelevant to my argument) (47).

2. By the time universal suffrage democracy emerged, the sectoral structure of the economy was already transformed by the industrial revolution, and a relatively small agricultural sector existed against a much larger industrial working force (48).

3. The secular *state* as a political device was long established, and secular legal arrangements established on the basis of a social consensus (49).

4. Literacy levels were high, if not universal, while in India, at the time of the adoption of the constitution, literacy levels were below 30%, and that meant an ability just to sign one's name.

5. Processes of social individuation were far advanced, and medieval communal bonds were already in serious decline.

6. To use Foucault's terminology, European societies had already established "states of governmentality".

7. What Weber termed a bureaucratic state or a *rechtstaat* already existed in many Western European countries.

Were these differences in the historical conditions when democratic institutions were introduced likely to cause serious differences in the pattern in which democracy functioned and evolved?

(47) This links up with the question of whether democracy can flourish under conditions of widespread poverty. In the initial discussions about the prospects of Indian democracy, many observers expressed great scepticism precisely because poverty was considered inimical to the durability of democratic institutions.

(48) Recent analyses of the relation between democracy and agriculture in India have drawn attention to the latent contradiction of the subsidy regime. A. Varshney's study points out that unlike in contemporary Europe, in India, a much smaller industrial sector of the economy, about 25%, is expected to subsidise a much larger agrarian sector. But because the votes of the agrarian sector are much greater, under democratic electoral politics, the pres-

sure for subsidies is irresistible: A. VARSHNEY, *Democracy, Development and the Countryside* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995).

(49) In India there is a serious debate about the relation between secular state and secular society since the publication of critical arguments against Nehruvian secularism by Ashis Nandy and T. N. Madan. Cf. Ashis NANDY, "Politics of secularism and the recovery of religious tolerance" and T. N. MADAN, "Secularism in its place", in Sudipta Kaviraj, ed., *Politics in India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998). For critical responses see, Rajeev BHARGAVA, *Secularism and its Critics* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2001) and Sudipta KAVIRAJ, ed., *Politics in India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998, pp. 293-298).

Sequence and structure

Answering that question depends on how we conceive the relation between sequence and structure. Theorists who believe in the symmetrical model recognise that there is often a difference in sequence in which key modern processes are introduced in a particular society. However, to their way of thinking, this does not make a material difference in the longer term. Because of the functional connection, through which different elements of the modernist paradigm support and reinforce each other, after a time, when most of the essential elements are put in place, modern societies tend to look very similar. But it would follow from the sequential reading of European modernity, that the sequence did matter substantially. Instead of the difference being gradually whittled down, the difference of origins and the set of initial conditions settled into radically different paths, so significant that while “first way” capitalism led to the growth of political democracy in England and France, “second way” capitalism in Germany, Italy and Russia pre-empted the growth of democratic institutions altogether, a dark prediction made with some force in Engels’s last writings in the 1890s (50).

The sequential theory then implies that *the precise sequence* in which constituent processes of modernity appear in a particular society would determine the specific *form* modernity in that context. If we accept the sequential view seriously, we should not treat modernity as a general, ubiquitous condition that has an emergently homogeneous character everywhere, but as a historically contingent combination of its constituent elements – which tend to produce different histories of the modern.

V

*Alterations to the theory**Four reasons for historical differentiation*

In the next part of this paper I shall offer four reasons for differentiation of trajectories, and provide some illustrations of such complexity

(50) Friedrich ENGELS, introduction to K. Marx, *Class Struggles in France* [1895], in K. MARX and F. ENGELS, *Selected Works, Volume I* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969, pp. 186-204).

from the history of modern India. These are not exhaustive; there can conceivably be other reasons for the differentiation of paths and institutional forms. But these show us why a revisionist theory is required.

Two meanings of "initial conditions"

The first reason is connected to the diversity of "initial conditions". Modernity is a transition into a transformed set of institutions from a prior set that were different. In some theories of modernity, universality is seen as a feature of modern institutions, but certainly not of pre-modern ones. Clearly, pre-modern is a *secondary* description of such societies (51), and a naïve reading of this term might suggest that it is an invariant condition; but clearly it is not. Modernity might be uniform, but what exists before it must be structurally diverse. This is a suggestion that should be acceptable to both sides, those who believe in theories of symmetry and sequence. These structures constitute the "initial" or prior conditions from which modern institutions begin to arise.

The phrase "initial conditions", used widely in historical explanations, appears unproblematic at first, but it is possible to detect two meanings in the use of this phrase. First, initial conditions might refer to those conditions that simply happen to exist as surrounding circumstances when a historical process of modern transformations starts. In this case, it is normal to expect that as the new process establishes itself its effects will slowly obliterate those initial circumstances. These would be initial in the sense that these conditions would exist at the start, when the process is weak, or immature, but would not leave any serious consequence when it matures. The initial character implies that these conditions are to be transcended. But in historical thinking initial conditions can also be used with a much stronger meaning. I shall illustrate this by an example drawn from intellectual history.

In his discussions on history of art, Hans Georg Gadamer uses a concept which might capture this second meaning more vividly (52).

(51) What I mean by secondary is that a characterisation as pre-modern does not refer to intrinsic characteristics of these societies, but to the discursively imposed characteristic of their being commonly different from the modern; but this is not actual commonness of characteristics of these societies. If I have six different coloured coats, and want to fetch the blue one, other coats become the coats that are not blue. But non-blue is not a colour attribute

intrinsic to the objects; it is a secondary attribute of the objects imposed on them by the necessity of distinguishing them from the blue. Non-blue is not a colour attribute. My point is that pre-modern is a secondary characterisation of this kind, and does not point to any real similarity of these societies.

(52) This is such a general theoretical problem that I am sure it arises in many other contexts. My example is taken from Gada-

Gadamer suggests that historical consciousness is always “effective-historical” (53). This means that a particular interpretation of a text or cultural object remains active *through its effects*, that is, the effect of a particular historical reading is not really erased when it is replaced by a succeeding interpretation. The subsequent reading, which is really different from the previous one, works on the material of the earlier reading, and is still determined by the first as its pre-condition – in both senses of the term. Although apparently inaccessible externally, closer analysis would always show that the effectuality of the earlier reading is never really effaced. It determines and shapes the character of the second reading and, in a sense, continues to exist precisely through what has replaced or suppressed it. It exists, to use a more playful paradox, precisely through its “absence”. Not to make this point inordinately mysterious, initial historical conditions in which processes of modernity begin to work would impart to those processes and institutions specific qualities and forms, which would become conditions for their further evolution. Initial conditions, to use Gadamer’s terminology, remain “effective-historical” (54). Generally similar arguments are commonly made in several disciplines of enquiry. In political history, observers often stress the significance of “founding times” or times of origin, like adoption of a constitutional design, which acquire a peculiar significance in the political evolution of a state, unlike other times. Discussions about economic history also often refer to the fact of “path dependency”, which invokes similar constraining effects of decisions taken at a crucial point of evolution.

The “translation” of practices

Initial conditions in which modern institutions and processes arrive in particular societies determine the subsequent shape of their modernity to a substantial extent. This can be illustrated by considering the nature of a social practice, and exactly what it means to say that a practice is made modern. What we call modernity in shorthand is a set of new practices in major spheres of social life: new practices of produc-

mer’s discussion on the indelibility of historical interpretations, and the way each layer of interpretation of a text forms an indelible condition for subsequent layers. See Hans Georg GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (Sheed and Ward, London, 1981).

(53) GADAMER, *Ibid.* p. 305ff.

(54) This is a preliminary formulation; it must be noted that while Gadamer’s primary concern is with the history of consciousness, our is with institutional history. The argument might need some inflection in order to be transposed on to this different field.

tion, governance, scientific cognition, education, artistic and cultural creativity. These *new* practices can be new in two different senses. Some practices are so utterly new that these did not have any precursors or precedents in earlier history (55). In some cases, it might be possible to say that a practice central to modernity is simply without precedent; but in many, modern practices are really transformed ways of doing the same general thing. Capitalist production emerges from and *works upon* earlier modes of producing economic life. Scholars of religious change have shown how the introduction of Christianity into non-European societies results not in the adoption of European forms of religious beliefs, but ones in which earlier forms of religiosity remain a powerful subterranean presence. Modernity certainly brought immense changes to the way political governance was organised, introducing representative institutions; but as I pointed out earlier, their actual functioning is bent in various ways by existing understandings and compartments of power. The application of Weber or Foucault's theoretical schema cannot work in a straightforward fashion. However, it is important to recognise that to call these institutions of governance non-Weberian is a curious epistemic manoeuvre. It describes *what they are not*; it does not offer a theoretical conception of what they are (56). Similarly, modernity introduces new practices of education, centred round modern scientific knowledge and its cognitive styles, and houses them in new institutional structures like universities with highly specific internal rules of operation and personal conduct. Actual pedagogic practices in these institutions are affected by earlier habits of knowing and communicating. Conditions of artistic production and circulation are usually revolutionised, but modern artistic practice often works upon narrative and artistic material drawn from pre-existing traditions. Not surprisingly, often the precise narrative forms are a hybrid between traditional and modern aesthetic modes. The newness of modern practices is worked upon the materials and memories of the old.

Let me illustrate this with an example from Indian education, though it could be done equally easily through examples from political life. Pre-modern Indian education, at least on the Hindu side of the field, was Brahminical in a broad sense: it placed great emphasis on mnemonic

(55) For a fascinating discussion of the birth of newness in history, see the essay on "Historical Ontology" in Ian HACKING, *Historical Ontology* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2004). Many new practices of scientific enquiry or experiment are new in this sense.

(56) In that sense, to call the functioning of the Indian state, or at least some of its segments, non-Weberian is a case of a secondary description, not a theoretical concept.

devices in learning, with stress on memorising central principles and being able to repeat them, rather than an analytic, critical discussion or elaboration of the main ideas (57). Its primary impulse in text-reading was exegetic, rather than critical. Although introduction of modern education in India involved awareness of the pedagogic requirement of developing critical capacities in students, it is generally recognised that even the modern Indian education system, in complex and subtle ways, incorporated the Brahminical emphasis on memory. Educational practice in India still struggles with the deep legacy of mnemonic learning which modern rationalistic pedagogy has not been able to replace entirely, and certainly not been able to erase without trace. “Historical epistemology might even claim”, as Hacking says, “that present ideas have memories” (58).

At one level, this is not hard to understand, nor surprising. If a modern practice is not one without precedent, the new practice is not written upon a clean slate. Though the language in which we persistently describe the newness of the modern encourages this illusion, in fact, there is no new unused “place” to write modern practices on. Practices are “written” upon pre-existing practices – to continue with the metaphor, it is a kind of writing upon writing. To keep our language clear, and free of misleading metaphorical associations, it is preferable then to speak of practices that modernized, emphasising the active meaning of the suffix “ized”, rather than use “old” and “new”. Given the nature of this “newness”, it is not surprising that these modernized practices, when they are changed, carry on many residues of older habitual conduct, and the meanings and habits of older processes affect and modify modern forms. I might learn the English language reasonably well; but when I speak it, the vocal habits of spoken Bengali affect, and can be heard, through my English speech. There can be parallels to this in the political universe: politicians might ascend to positions of power by punctiliously/unimpeachably electoral procedures, but those in their field of power might extend to them forms of reverence drawn from a traditional, princely repertoire; and they might draw upon these older repertoires themselves. This is not just a mistake of treating one kind of authority with the deference suited to another; actually, this is the characteristic historical process of the previous practice existing within the newer one as “memory”, and substantially altering

(57) This does not mean that Hindu philosophical systems were not based on rational reasoning and intellectual creativity; but rather that before the entry of modernity, Brahminical pedagogical systems had ossified

into a largely uninventive pattern of instruction.

(58) Ian HACKING, *Historical Ontology*, 8 (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

its operation. Artistic production creates new aesthetic forms, which cannot be reduced to either purely Western or traditional forms. Post-colonial theorists sometimes refer to this general pattern of events as “hybridity”. But hybridity is an excessively general term, and does not distinguish between the many distinct ways in which the traditional and the European-derived modern might relate and configure. At times, the older and newer practices might tend in the same direction, and become miscible, as, for instance, in the case of the idioms of traditional religious toleration and modern secular institutions in India. In other cases, they might be more oppositional or contradictory. Consequently, while accepting that the idea of hybridity captures a historically significant fact, it is essential to emphasise the need for further conceptual refinement. A second conceptual strategy to capture this process is to regard them as a form of “translation”, which is a suggestive way of thinking about them, but with some attendant difficulties. In a literary translation too, two languages interact, and what is produced as the end effect is generally acknowledged to be more a fusion of meanings, rather than a simply one-way writing of the meanings of a text into an entirely different passive language. Language is never passive to that extent. Even in literary translations, it is impossible to turn off the connotative effectivity of the receiving language to ensure the transfer of meanings from the language of the text. The historical argument is largely similar: the social effectiveness of the prior practices are never entirely neutralised by the reception of new ways of doing things.

Specificities of sequence

The second reason for differentiation is simply drawn from the earlier discussion about sequencing. If sequencing plays a causative role in the specific formation of modernity in each particular society, it follows that the exact pattern of the interweaving or braiding of the processes would be of crucial importance. For example, several current discussions about Indian democracy can instantiate a larger debate about the precise sequencing effects of the component processes. At the time of India’s independence, it was simply taken for granted that the symmetrical-functional reading of Western modernity was correct; indeed, there was no competing hypothesis about how to read that history (59). Indian

(59) There is little explicit presentation of Western history of modernity in Indian writings of the 20th century, because, whatever

the evaluative stance of different writers, all took the symmetrical view to be self-evidently correct; but this picture forms the basis of the

nationalist leaders therefore deliberately attempted to advance all these processes simultaneously in the hope that they would support each other, or fall together in the face of a resurgence of tradition (60). Accordingly, after independence the modernist elite sought to run the institutions of capitalism, democracy, the secular state, and social individuation together. Few critics, except some heterodox business leaders, had the courage to claim that the simultaneous pursuit of democracy and capitalist growth might lead to contradictions, or that this belief in parallel growth was based on a misunderstanding of the European precedents (61). Some business leaders complained that capitalist enterprise could develop more rapidly if the trade union rights of India's organised labour were less entrenched and extensive. In view of the later debates among development economists regarding democracy and development, and the influential thesis that an authoritarian state like South Korea was better suited to supervising and arranging economic growth (62), it appears that it was not the Indian model, which closely followed European precedents, but South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. The East Asian economies developed their capitalist industries powerfully during a spell of authoritarian rule; and subsequently, these tigers were getting used to the taming of ferocity required by democratic government. Observers have pointed out that one of the major problems for government policy is that Indian democracy operates in an economic environment in which the major part of the population still pursues agricultural occupations. Because of their electoral weight, the agrarian sector extracts huge subsidies from elected governments; yet such subsidies, apart from their efficiency, run up against a more fundamental limit, because a smaller sector of the economy – around 25% – cannot indefinitely subsidise a sector that is much larger in size (63). This is a sequence problem because Indian

arguments offered by liberals, socialists and communists.

(60) It was taken for granted, for instance, that if caste or religious identity were used widely in electoral politics, this would lead to a collapse or degeneration of democratic institutions. This has been one of the central interpretative issues in Indian politics since the 1960s.

(61) Business leaders often pointed out that legislation favourable to labour slowed down their ability to develop capitalist industry and economic growth. They did not bother about questions of reading European history, but that was the implication of their claim.

(62) Recently, this debate has been re-

opened in the Indian case by Vivek CHIBBER's interesting study, *Locked in Place* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004), which directly compares the role of the state in the economic development in South Korea and India. Two earlier collections on this theme are Amiya Kumar BAGCHI, ed., *Democracy and Development* (St. Martins Press, New York, 1994) and Adrian LEFTWICH, *Democracy and Development* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995).

(63) Ashutosh VARSHNEY, *Democracy, Development and the Countryside* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1995) explicitly makes this point – which is, in my sense, a typical sequence argument.

democracy arose at a time when the economy was largely agricultural.

To take a third example, the institutions of a secular state were established in Western European societies in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, long before the advent of electoral democracy. In India, because of the introduction of democracy and secularism by the same constitution, it appears plausible to some political groups to demand that the principles of the secular state themselves should be subjected to a democratic ratification (64). The problems and challenges of the establishment and consolidation of democracy in India are, because of the historical difference in sequence, entirely different from the European story.

Improvisation

Third, modernity in traditional societies introduces processes of institutional change that are driven either by some kind of structural logic – like the operation of a market in which capitalist firms produce the primary products for the society’s consumption – or an institutional norm – like democratic government, or secular states where institutions are deliberately organised around certain general principles. In the second type of cases, the historical evolution of modernity takes the form of “generative” processes: they are centred around acceptance of distinctive fundamental *principles* which groups of actors – politicians, classes, communities – constantly seek to fit to their determinate historical circumstances. In the construction and running of institutions, the principles are more fundamental than external forms. Following these norms does not make any sense, unless these are translated into institutional forms, and institutional forms operate under initial conditions of intelligibility specific to these societies. If actors who construct a democracy in a setting where 70% of the electorate are illiterate, they have to adjust to this condition in their institutional design. Otherwise, the institutions simply would not work. If they have to make the state function for secular ideals, in a surrounding society that is still deeply religious, they have to take into account whether such practices are already available in the cultural repertoires of the society (65). Improvisation, in

(64) This is the claim advanced by the Bharatiya Janata Party but such instances can be found in the political history of other Third World states as well.

(65) I believe that the religious traditions of tolerance in India are often incorrectly counterpoised to the modern norms of secular politics. While they are certainly grounded in

this sense, i.e., not simply copying them from other successful democracies, but fitting them to a society's peculiar circumstances, is of the essence of the unfolding of the modern. As a result of such historical improvisation, it is likely that institutions of democracy or capitalism or secularism would tend to develop unprecedented features and institutional idiosyncrasies in different historical settings. Unlike conventional political science, the proper way of judging them is not to take a map of European institutions and decide whether the new forms are "correct" or not – by judging if they fitted the European "norm" – but to test them more abstractly and philosophically against the relevant principles.

To take a well-known Indian example, K. C. Wheare, the English political scientist, measured Indian federalism against the "dominant" American-derived model, and decided to characterise it as "quasi-federal" (66), causing much avoidable anguish to a generation of Indian constitutionalists who made heroic attempts to defend the conceptual respectability of the Indian federation. Obviously, the correct response to Wheare was not to try to prove that the Indian system was really like the American one and that Wheare had empirically misjudged it. That would have been to recognise that it was not, and claim that Wheare had used an inappropriate measure, and to theoretically endorse the Indian politicians' improvisation on the received architecture of federalism to suit the Indian political context. After all, the real test for a political institution of one country is not whether it resembled another, but if it could respond effectively to the political demands it was likely to encounter. Quite often, the only way of entrenching an institutional system in a different culture is precisely to break away from a slavish adherence to European precedents. What would have appeared unacceptably heterodox to the Euro-normal thinking of conventional political science in Wheare's time should be seen as a case of major success in imaginative political architecture.

Reflexivity

Finally, it is commonly acknowledged that one of the major features of the culture of modernity is the principle of reflexivity. This is a difficult and many-sided notion, and quite different aspects of modern

fundamentally different views of the world, their practical precepts and their historical tendency are "miscible". For a discussion of the Indian debate on secularism and its grounding principles, see Rajeev BHARGAVA,

ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998).

(66) K. C. WHEARE, *Federal Governments* (Oxford University Press, London, 1963).

culture and its typical institutions are regarded as reflexive in different senses. I shall deal with a few features, but there could conceivably be some others, which are left out of my discussion. Theories of modernity, which offer different judgements about it in descriptive or evaluative terms, concur that a central principle driving different spheres of modern culture was rational questioning or criticism. Appeals to authority were culturally undermined in vastly divergent fields – from art to scientific enquiry – and an appeal to rational argument and critical judgement finally decided acceptance of a proposition or a point of view. Weberian sociology suggests that this principle of rational-critical judgement animates the politics of liberal democracy, modern scientific culture, the constant search for economic efficiency, and modernity's re-foundation of ethics on human reason. Precisely because it is a common principle that organises institutions in such divergent fields, this also provides a kind of overarching normative link between various aspects of the modern civilisation.

This capacity for rational consideration and arriving at judgements that are argumentative, dialogical, provisional and revisable has another obvious field of application. In modern cultures people turn their capacity for rational reasoning and criticism upon themselves – at least in two ways. Reflexivity leads to assessments of their own conduct from an *exterior* point of view, which was unavailable to non-European societies before the arrival of Western ideas. New influences broke the obviousness and the immovability of cultural habitus, the impossibility of conceiving the world in any except an “internal” way. This made it possible for non-Europeans to evaluate their own societies from a kind of Archimedian point, leading to rejection of conventional ways of social behaviour (67). Reflexivity however cannot stop there, simply using Western modernity as an exterior point of view that comprehensively undermines traditional cultures. The capacity for critical reflection extends to assessments of institutions and practices of Western modernity as well, leading to two further results. Reflection on the precise conditions in which a group of people or even individuals wish to realise some modern principle does give rise to improvisation and proliferation of new forms. If the Japanese develop techniques of running modern capitalist firms in innovative ways, saying that they do not conform to earlier known management patterns is hardly an effective argument.

(67) An obvious example from Indian history would be the conduct of the adherents of the Brahmo sect, who clearly owned rationalistic principles, and used them as criteria to

reject crucial aspects of conventional Hindu religion like doctrinal pantheism and social practices of caste.

Indeed, proliferation of new forms of this kind feed back into the older versions of institutions as well – extending the repertoire of capitalist management. More significantly, latecomers into modernity have the vast expanse of the historical experience of modern European civilisation open for critical examination before them. If they take the impulse of critical reasoning and rejection of authority seriously, they will recognise that the unquestioned prestige of Western modernity, at least of its dominant ideological narrative, is a most formidable authority in contemporary culture which works exactly like other sources of authority, and needs critical evaluation. In fact, the powerful idea that animates the modern ideal – that individuals and societies should live an elective life, as they choose or think fit – requires this critical response. Turning the faculty of critical reasoning upon oneself, one's own situation, conduct, ideals, on one's own society and its practices, thus results in a critical reading of all history, including that of the modern West. Modern culture leads to an application of the same critical criteria to the experiences of Western modernity itself, though advocates of Western modernity are unnecessarily startled by this assertion (68). The peculiar popularity of Marxism among the intelligentsia of the colonial world is perhaps linked to the fact that it offered them a way of being both modern and anti-Western. It is entirely conceivable that a late entrant into modernity might not applaud every aspect of modern European civilisation. They might reject some major proposals of modern politics or ethics, after subjecting them to rational criticism. The intellectual results of this kind of critical reasoning are not expressions of opposition to modernity, but an essential continuation of its spirit. The final reason for the deviation of new modernities from the old European ones is disillusionment with the overall pattern of life that European modernity itself has gradually elaborated over the last centuries. Disillusionment with aspects of Western modernity is likely to encourage the logic of institutional improvisation even further. The historically declining imaginative power of the West (69), despite its military dominance, makes it unlikely that diverging trajectories of the modern in other parts of the world can be folded back into recognisable Western patterns – that

(68) It is impossible to expand on this theme within this paper. But one of the major strands of modern Indian historical reflection is precisely this line of thinking, displayed with immense power and clarity in the works of Gandhi and Tagore.

(69) The imaginative dominance of the West appears to have declined, compared to the mid-20th century. Although the communist

alternative to Western liberal society has collapsed, other imaginaries have appeared which deny the dominance of Western forms of life. Some of the volatility of world politics in the present phase can be traced to the peculiar imbalance between the continued military and economic dominance of the West and the decline of its imaginative hegemony.

people can be persuaded to force their futures into versions of the Western past.

VI

A second threshold of social theory

If true, this argument has large implications. It appears that social theory in the widest sense – not merely in the explicit form of “theory”, but also as the inexplicit assumptions and methods that animate social science research in general – has entered an interesting critical period, because of a fundamental imbalance. One of the major new developments in social knowledge has been the addition of a vast body of careful historical knowledge about non-European societies to the immense documentation of Western life that already existed. But this extension has also led to an underlying theoretical crisis, because the more interesting and perceptive work on other societies is evincing increasing discomfort with the structure of received theory, simply because its major presuppositions, arguments, examples and generalisations were all drawn, quite naturally, from the stock of European historical experience. It is proving impossible to force this new body of intractable evidence into the received theoretical architecture. This might suggest that social sciences have imperceptibly reached a significant threshold. The methodological dispute in German sociology in the early 20th century indicated that the common methods of natural science do not easily cross over into the very different field and materials of social science; scientific enquiry needed a methodological retuning when it crossed this boundary. In contemporary social science, we have reached a similar boundary between the West and other societies – a threshold that requires the social sciences to have significantly different concepts and theoretical generalisations. Producing what I have called “secondary” descriptions is not a particularly promising response to this problem. It is necessary to preserve and continue the great tradition of Western social theory without being imprisoned within its borders (70).

(70) In recent debates in Indian social science, several authors have suggested a comparable programme. See for instance, Partha Chatterjee’s attempt to theorize a distinction between civil and political society, in a way that is entirely different from European precedents: Partha CHATTERJEE, *The Politics of*

the Governed (Columbia University Press, New York, 2004); Dipesh CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe*, chapter 1, where he explains what he means by “provincializing” (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2002); Rajeev Bhargava’s work on secularism points to significant changes in the theory of

If we follow something like the strategy outlined here we can draw upon the rich resources of existing traditions of social theory, but break away from the superstitious affiliation to its origins, and develop it in ways that can make better sense of the different trajectories of modernity in the world.

In the last analysis, what this paper suggests may be a matter of historical common sense. But the imaginative power of social theory is so overwhelming that much of contemporary mainstream social science – particularly the hinge that crucially links modern social theory, which developed in Europe to the emerging social science research of other societies – simply disregards this central question. It is time that this view, now a heterodoxy, becomes a new commonsense.

secularism in Indian nationalist discourse: Rajeve BHARGAVA, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (2001). I make a similar point in “In search of civil society”, in Sudipta KAVIRAJ and Sunil

KHILNANI, eds, *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, chapter 15).