Western modernity: one among many

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Abstract

The emergence of the idea of ‘multiple modernities’ in the 1990s has made a significant contribution to debates about the salient features of contemporary world, and opened up rich new veins of research. Notably, it has spawned a vast literature on varieties of experience in non-western social spheres. Less widely explored, however, have been the implications of this perspective for the analysis of Western modernity. In this paper I explore what might be learnt from such an approach through an examination of Alain Touraine’s Critique of Modernity. Touraine has not identified himself with the emerging paradigm of multiple modernities or the civilizational analysis from which it draws its founding premises. However, Critique of Modernity is not only consonant with them, but an illuminating exemplar of their application to a systematic examination of the specificities of the Western experience.

Keywords: multiple modernities, western modernity, Touraine

The idea of ‘multiple modernities’ which emerged in the 1990s has resonated widely among analysts of contemporary social relations around the globe. The founding gesture of the new approach - a break with the widespread assumptions that there is one main pattern of modernization and one main pattern of modernity (Arnason 2002) — has been taken up in particular by analysts of social formations often considered to be on the peripheries of the modern world. The vast literature on contemporary non-western social constellations it has spawned (Freter, 2009; Kamali 2006; Oommen 2001) has, moreover, made a significant
contribution to debates about the salient features of contemporary world, notably those around notions of postmodernity and globalization (Arnason 1995:16). In the first case, it has suggested that ‘modernity’ has not been exhausted; in the second, it has offered a cautionary counterpoint to over homogenizing notions of the convergence of modern societies, be they positively or negatively construed.

Less widely explored, however, have been the implications of the idea of multiple modernities for the analysis of Western modernity. As the exponents of the paradigm of multiple modernities have made clear, the ‘multiplication of modernity’ (Arnason 2002) not only brings to the fore divergent experiences, but also calls into question long held and widespread understandings of the western experience.

Most significantly, the multiple modernities approach foregrounds the civilizational particularities of what was for a longtime considered the pioneering instance of a culture-neutral, ‘universal’ model. As the proponents of the paradigm make clear, the idea that modernity entails a complete break with tradition is as misleading in relation to the western model as that of non-western experiences.

In what follows, I explore some of the insights that emerge from an examination of the specificities of the western experience through an exploration of Alain Touraine’s Critique of Modernity. Touraine has not identified himself with the emerging paradigm of multiple modernities, but as I have argued elsewhere, Critique of Modernity is thoroughly consonant with both its central themes and underlying premises (Ballantyne 2001). To begin, I will briefly outline the parameters of the multiple modernities approach.

Two theorists in particular are associated with the idea of multiple modernities. The first is SN Eisenstadt (2000a; 2000b), whose civilization theory forms the primary perspectival reference point for the idea. The second is Johann Arnason, who has provided a systematic legitimation of civilizational theory as the framework for sociological analysis more broadly (2003), and taken up and developed the idea of multiple modernities (2001). Although the convergence between them is by no means complete, they share an underlying image of modernity, and the thematic,
perspectival and conceptual affinities in their work are strong enough to allow us to speak of an emerging new paradigm.

At the centre of the new approach is a rejection of the conception of (western) modernity as a break with tradition. Instead, it points to the lasting impact of civilizations. More particularly it argues that diverse civilizational legacies give rise to multiple forms of modernity. The legacies involved are both cultural and institutional; with different formulations and emphases, Eisenstadt and Arnason both see civilizations as macro historical macro social and macro cultural combinations of cultural visions of the world’ and ‘regulative frameworks of social life’ (Eisenstadt 2000a; 2000b: 1). One of the primary themes of the new approach is the role of non-western traditions in the creation of diverse forms of modernity. Interaction with the western model has been a component of all modernizing processes and patterns, but non-Western forms have been co-determined by the encounter with local civilizational settings. It follows, equally, however, that the civilizational factor is as operative in the western case as all others. From this perspective, the particularly pronounced universalistic elements of the Western model (and corresponding relevance to the global context) appear as an outgrowth of, rather than break with, its traditional sources.

Underlying these themes is a conception of modernity that departs from more conventional approaches in some significant ways. Against those who define modernity primarily in relation to structural or institutional factors, the multiple modernities approach stresses the constitutive role of cultural orientations and structures of consciousness. And against all forms of cultural determinism, it insists on the autonomy of culture and the openness of cultural frameworks to reinterpretation in changing social and historical contexts. On the perspectival level, Eisenstadt and Arnason share a hermeneutical understanding of culture and its role in social life. Eisenstadt’s hermeneutical premises are implicit, but Arnason draws explicitly on hermeneutical themes. He appeals to the theme of the conflict of interpretations to ground the view, shared with Eisenstadt, that the core cultural orientations of modernity are open to multiple interpretations, and to Gadamer’s notion of effective history to thematize the plasticity and formative influence of cultural frameworks which partly constitute social practices and institutions. For Arnason, too,
the emphasis on cultural orientations makes a hermeneutics of the self-understanding of modernity an essential complement to historical and structural analysis.

The outcome is a conception of modernity that is internally conflictual; in contrast to unified or harmonious conceptions, modernity is characterized by irreducible tensions operative at both cultural and social levels. In more concrete terms, the new perspective identifies new conceptions of human agency, subject to a conflict of interpretations in which it is interpreted as reflexivity and expressivity on the one side, and rational mastery and control on the other, as the central core of cultural modernity.

As several commentators have noted, Critique of Modernity (1995) marked a distinctive new intellectual period for Touraine (Wagner 1998: 163). In it, the ‘actionalist’ sociology of society he had elaborated in Self-Production Society was transmogrified into a ‘sociology of the subject’ and a historical sociology of modernity (Touraine, 1995). This development involved two shifts of focus which brought this work into contact with the idea of multiple modernities. The first was a shift of focus from the social to the cultural field, and the second was a shift from a general theory of society to a particular critique of modernity. The result was an approach which gives prominence to the specificities of the traditions which, Touraine argues, played a central role in the western model of modernity; in this work, he analyzes the social forms, conflicts and logics of modernity through an elucidation of the most historically effective self-interpretations of modernity, analyzed in terms of developments, transformations and specific combinations of concrete traditions. This does not entail a notion of undifferentiated, conflict-free tradition, or a deterministic relationship to it. Rather, his analysis brings to the fore the selective, and often conflictual, reactivations of concrete cultural traditions as they are reinterpreted in the light of new historical circumstances.

Touraine’s view of the central cultural orientations of modernity also converges with that of the multiple modernities approach. For Touraine, the emergence of the subject and new conceptions of agency associated with it are defining features of modernity, and like Eisenstadt and Arnason, he stresses a bifurcation in the most historically significant cultural and social embodiments of them. For him, it is ‘rationalization’ and ‘subjectivation’ which areas the core cultural
orientations of modernity. These orientations are interdependent; the rationalization of the modern world depends upon the formation of subjects (Touraine 1995: 203) and the process of subjectivation depends upon the appropriation of rationality (Touraine 1995: 230). But there is an irreducible tension between them, because the ongoing process of rationalization has created a world in which rationality is predominantly associated with power apparatuses which tend to suppress rather than promote the striving for freedom that constitutes subjectivity. Finally, for Touraine, the cultural orientations of modernity are always embodied in social practices and institutions, and he sees the defining tension of modernity as one between both principles and processes.

Arnason has noted a number of features of this work which make it a particularly useful starting point for an exploration of western modernity from the multiple modernities perspective. Firstly, rationalization and subjectivation are understood as complementary albeit equally incomplete self-images of modernity. Secondly, interpretive constructs and frameworks are seen to have a logic and efficacy of their own, and to acquire new meanings as their potential is selectively realized in changing contexts. In addition, for Arnason, Touraine’s account of rationalization and subjectivation is superior to many others, because the two constitutive forces are conceived as open-ended sets of trends visible across different arenas of social life and phases of history, including the nation-state, the enterprise and the consumer (Arnason 2002). Touraine’s analysis of the fragments of modernity is indeed instructive; in the limited space available here, however, I can only offer an indication of the analytical potential generated by this approach. In particular, I will focus on the delineation of three broad phases of modernity which emerges, and the insights which come to light when emphasis is placed on the specificities of the traditions which co-determine modernity.

Touraine’s analysis of successive self-images of modernity through the analytical prism of rationalization and subjectivation identifies three main phases of modernity: an ‘early modern’ period which lasted till the end of the eighteenth century; the period of ‘modernity triumphant’ which spanned most of the nineteenth century, and a more ambiguous period of fragmentation which characterized most of the twentieth century. His elucidation of them gives a particular slant to the critique of the idea of modernity as the triumph of reason. It uncovers the traditional
sources of both the dominant rationalist conception of modernity, and an alternative modernity which it suppressed. The break through to modernity meant the destruction of the correspondence between a divine subject and a natural order, but rationalist - and especially historicist - self-understandings of modernity reasserted the idea of unity in the idea of a world unified by reason. From this point of view, the dominant rationalist conception of modernity is a selective reactivation of traditions which gives rise to a unified world view, and subordinates the subject to reason. As such, it is a one-sided and unbalanced expression of the cultural constituents of modernity.

Touraine’s argument begins with the cultural background to the breakthrough to modernity. The tension between rationalization and subjectivation that is at the heart of modernity emerged from the particular cultural context of Christianity. This context is important because the Christian world was not a world which was at the mercy of the favourable or unfavourable intentions or hidden forces, but a world which was both created by a divine subject, and organized in accordance with rational laws. It was the break up of this world, which was both wholly created and wholly intelligible, which led to a separation of the order of objective knowledge and the order of the subject; the idea of the rational construction of the world was transformed into science, and the breaking of the link between the divine subject and the human subject set free self-expression (Touraine 1995: 205). More particularly, Touraine sees the distinctive Augustinian turn to the ‘inner man’ as the basis for the modern conception of the subject, because the Augustinian idea that God is discovered by turning inwards breaks with the idea of reason as harmony with the world, and provide the basis for a conception of subjectivity which is not reducible to reason. On this view, the religious worldview of Christianity is not the antithesis of modernity. Rather, its dualism prefigured the defining tension within modernity.

As Touraine sees it, in early modernity the tension between rationalization and subjectivation was given expression most notably in the contrast between the Renaissance and the Reformation in the sixteenth century. But it was also, he argues characteristic of seventeenth, and to a lesser extent, eighteenth century thought. In this vein, he argues that Descartes is not simply the founding father of modern rationalism, but also ‘the principle agent of the transformation of Christian dualism into modern ways of thinking about the subject’ (Touraine 1995: 47).
Descartes’ break with pre-modern conceptions, which defined the subject in terms of harmony with the world led not to a world unified by reason, but to a dualism of the ‘world of things’ and an ‘inner world’. And Descartes’ subject is not only a thinking subject capable of mastering nature, but also an assertion of the freedom of the human subject. More provocatively, Touraine argues that while Locke is responsible for some of the most influential elements of rationalist thought, he also invoked a conception of natural law to defend the subject against the absolutism of the state (Touraine 1995: 48).

The second socio-cultural configuration which emerges from Touraine’s analysis was characterized by a very different relationship between rationalization and subjectivation. As Touraine sees it, the dualistic mode of thought was progressively marginalized throughout the eighteenth century, as the ‘classical’ self-understanding of modernity coalesced around Enlightenment notions of reason and progress. This interpretation of modernity held that there is an intimate connection between a scientific culture (which ensures the rational organization of production and administration), a rational legal order, and individual freedom, and its goal was to establish a fully rational society. Touraine’s argument in this regard is that this self-conception of modernity was a selective, and particularly one-sided, reactivation of Western traditions. Enlightenment naturalism and materialism functioned to unify ‘man’ and world, and the naturalist image of humankind was subordinated to reason. Thus, although the Enlightenment saw itself as a break with tradition, its idea that reason was the basis for a correspondence between the liberty of the individual, the organization of society and rational mastery was ultimately an attempt to preserve the traditional idea of the unity of humankind and the universe (Touraine 1995: 23). On this view, the Enlightenment struggle against Christianity was a transition from a dualistic view of the world to a unified conception of man and world, which subordinated subjectivity to the idea of a rational order. This selective relationship with tradition obscured the part of western tradition which embodied a non-rationalist conception of the subject and a mode of thought based on a dualism of reason and subjectivity.

In line with the multiple modernities approach, Touraine’s analysis stresses the transformations in cultural orientations wrought by historical developments and transformations of ideas into action. The crucial historical developments which transformed the relationship between
rationalization and subjectivation were the French and industrial revolutions. Their impact was registered above all in the transformation of the idea of progress that they provoked. On the one hand, the French Revolution introduced the idea of an historical actor, and on the other, the expanded capacity for self-transformation engendered by industrialization transformed reason into a force that could transform history. After the revolutions, ‘progress’ was no longer simply a matter of knowledge; it was a matter of social and political mobilization, aimed above all at the development of forms of production and labour.

Touraine’s analysis here also focuses on the concrete cultural traditions in which the modern concept of progress was embedded. The most important features of the idea of progress which came to dominate advanced modernity stem from nineteenth century modes of thought which interpreted progress against the background of a philosophy of history. The forms which were to have the most influence were shaped by the historicist conception of history as a ‘totality with a direction’; the conception of progress which it produced radicalized the image of a unified world, and in so doing, subordinated the subject to reason far more effectively than the Enlightenment inspired vision of progress. The historicist innovation in relation to the constitutive traditions of the West was to fuse into a single intellectual system what had been distinct traditions in tension in the early modern period. The synthesis of the liberalism of the rights of man, and the idea of the ‘general will’ that resulted identified the subject with the idea that history has a meaning and a direction. As Touraine sees it, this fusion of the tradition based on the idea that ‘man’, society and universe form a unity and the idea of the subject is particularly destructive, because it is self-contradictory (Touraine 1995: 64).

In the space available here, I cannot discuss Touraine’s interpretation of the contemporary phase of western modernity. From this account of the earlier phases has, however, it is possible to draw out two important implications relevant to the main concerns raised in this paper. In the first place, Touraine’s analysis in Critique of Modernity is a systematic and sustained account of the co-determination of modernity by tradition which not only decisively undermines the idea of modernity as a culture neutral, universal social formation, but brings to light the civilizational specificities underlying the putatively universal model. Secondly, by paying attention to those specificities, and in particular submerged and suppressed currents, he sheds new light on the
possibilities for a rethinking and reconstruction of western modernity in more open and balanced ways. For Touraine, ‘modernism’ - the idea that rationalization required the destruction of traditional social bonds and beliefs; that modernization is the result not of the activity of social actors, but of reason itself, through the spread of science, technology and education; and that capitalism is the economic form of modernity - is a distorted and impoverished form of the cultural resources of modernity, and a renewal of its latent other half is the key to a more adequate realization of its potentials.

References


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