



Book Review :

«Multiple Modernities and Good Governance»

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‘In 1964, when the United States Supreme Court was considering the question of the censorship of “obscene” materials, Associate Justice Potter Stewart remarked that he could not define pornography but he knew it when he saw it. The same might be said of modernity: Everyone thinks they know it when they see it, but getting a handle on the concept has not been easy’ (Gelvin 2011, 69). As James L. Gelvin perceptively points out with some irony, defining “modernity” is indeed one of the most daunting, problematic, and controversial tasks for — among others— historians, political theorists, and philosophers. As a matter of fact, “modernity” may represent a paradigmatic example of an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Gallie 1956). If, as it is, one of the main feature of such concepts is that ‘each party recognises the fact that its own use of it is contested by those of other parties, and that each party must have at least some appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question’ (Gallie 1956, 172), then the importance of the question “whose modernity?” becomes apparent. Such question is openly raised by Rodney Bruce Hall in the book *Multiple Modernities and Good Governance*, edited by Thomas Meyer and José Luís de Sales Marques. However, it would not be mistaken to maintain that such a question overtly or covertly underlies the entire book. As Manuel Castells contends in his essay:

Edited by
Thomas Meyer & José Luís de Sales Marques



Multiple Modernities and Good Governance

‘The modern contrasts with the pre-modern and with the post-modern. Both pre-modern and post-modern are understood in reference to the modern: that is, from our specific perspective in which time/space are defined by the subject, rather than from some chronology external to our experience of a space that transcends our experience. [...] Regarded from this vantage point, modernity is always our modernity’

(Castells 2018, 143).

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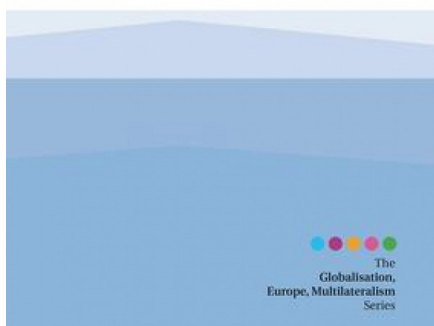
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From a Western and European viewpoint, it is certainly true that our (that is, Western and European) notion of modernity is largely indebted to Kant's rationalism (Hall 2018, 30-31). However, following the Israeli sociologist Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's "multiple modernities" approach, the book *Multiple Modernities and Good Governance* is grounded in the assumption that our (i.e., Western and European) conception of modernity is not the only possible one and that 'modernity and Westernisation are not identical' (Eisenstadt 2000, 2-3), as the editor Thomas Meyer recalls in the Introduction. Jürgen Kocka elegantly expresses this point by stating that:

'Some concepts —"modernity" being one of them— have a tendency to wander, and when they do, they change. Societal projects such as the formation of civil society emerge and seek recognition from specific historical cultures. When they broaden their demands for recognition to include other historical cultures, they also have to transform themselves, or at least they ought to do so. Otherwise, either they will end up not being taken seriously or else they will have to impose themselves by force on the culture from which they seek recognition' (Kocka 2018, 161).

Therefore, several contributors in the book correctly emphasise the main issue that the concept of multiple modernities may raise: namely, the definitional problem. The key question is to achieve a definition of the core of modernity which is broad enough to be inclusive toward different cultural horizons but which is not all-encompassing. In fact, by widening the concepts of "modern" and "modernity" in order to accommodate different conceptions of them, one risks to introduce an excess of vagueness and to irremediably jeopardise any meaningful use of such terms:

'[T]his category shift —the pluralization of modernity in the course of its global diffusion— has a cost. The common denominator of all these modernities, the indispensable defining feature that justifies the employment of any concept whatever, whether in the plural or not, is frequently left vague or vanishingly small. [...] But on the basis of such soft definitions, it is scarcely possible to distinguish different degrees of modernity. At the same time, the dichotomous terminology of modern versus traditional is explicitly relativized or even abandoned. Consequently, almost anything can pass for modern. Yet, as we know, there is not much analytical utility in concepts that include much and exclude little' (Kocka 2018, 164-165).

How to cope with such an essential definitional issue? As Thomas Meyer rightly underscores, the same Eisenstadt is aware of such problem and tries to define a 'common core of all the different types of modernity' (Meyer 2018, 17-18).

According to Eisenstadt, '[t]he cultural program of modernity entailed some very distinct shifts in the conception of human agency, and of its place in the flow of time. It carried a conception of the future characterized by a number of possibilities realizable through autonomous human agency' (2000, 3).

Starting from these premises, *Multiple Modernities and Good Governance* attempts to answer the crucial definitional question in an innovative way. The central thesis of the book is that it is both possible and necessary to fill the common but pluralistic core of modernity with content. This operation can be achieved by appealing to other concepts ("good governance", "human security", "variegated capitalism," and so on), which share with the notion of multiple modernities an open but not over-relativistic nature. Such concepts may be seen as specifying different dimensions of the multiple modernities approach.

By analysing their intersections and overlapping, it becomes possible to meaningfully grasp the properly "modern" common core of multiple modernities. To be sure, such core can be nothing but plural, complex, multi-layered, and changing. However, such a view does justice to the diversity of conceptions of modernity, but at the same time it shows that the concept of multiple modernities is not theoretically empty. Ideally, the project of the book begins with the historical and conceptual journey sketched by Mario Telò, who reconstructs the stages of the 'Europeans' successive interactions and dialogues with other civilizations' (Telò 2018, 101), thus retracing the path that brought about the conditions of possibility for a differentiation between the categories of "Westernisation" and "modernisation."

The argument is then developed across the book's chapters, through the analysis of the different possible dimensions of the multiple modernities approach. It seems to me that the notion of 'multiplexity' introduced by Amitav Acharya provides a key for understanding the overall project of the book: the idea of a multiplicity of modernities pluralise not only our projections about future, but the "modern" existence itself, that is, the ways in which one can be seen —here and now— as "modern." As Acharya puts it, 'as with a multiplex cinema, a multiplex world gives its audience a wider choice of plots or stories. [...] In a Multiplex World, the West no longer dominates the global idea "marketplace"' (2018, 74).

To conclude, I would like to add two considerations about the relevance of the book from the perspective of political theory in general.

Firstly, the essays included in *Multiple Modernities and Good Governance* clearly show the importance of the multiple modernities approach with reference to both of the two main angles of any contemporary political philosophical reflection about justice, namely, justice as distribution and justice as recognition (Maffettone 2013, 18 and 2014, 13; concerning justice as distribution, see for instance Inge Kaul's remarks about what he calls 'global public goods,' whilst for the second viewpoint, see Jürgen Kocka's contribution). Secondly, I would like to raise another question which —I believe— silently underlies many essays in the book: what kind of philosophical normative approach should Western liberals adopt in order to come to terms with the idea of multiple modernities? The contributors of this book demonstrate that, if the goal is to make room to various forms of modernity from a normative perspective, liberals cannot unproblematically rely on a strongly 'comprehensive' (Rawls 2005) Kantian account of rationality and individual autonomy. However, I would like to submit the idea —without the claim of making a proper philosophical argument for it here— that another ('political' rather than 'comprehensive,' Rawls 2005) version of liberalism is at hand in order to democratically cope with the 'fact of reasonable pluralism' as 'the inevitable outcome of free human reason' (Rawls 2005, 37). A Rawlsian 'overlapping consensus' may represent a viable configuration to solve the problem of identifying a plural and yet shareable definition of "modernity" (for a more detailed account about how political liberalism and liberal 'public reason' can deal with the 'fact of reasonable pluralism' in contemporary European societies, see Vezzani 2016). In a world characterised by "multiple modernities," liberals do not need to stop being liberal: political liberalism seems to have the resources to internalise the idea of a multiplicity of modernities and to achieve a 'pluralistic' or 'negotiated' form of universalism (Acharya 2018, 82; Kocka 2018, 165).

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