D. V. Kumar

CONTESTING THE EUROPEAN ORIGINS OF MODERNITY

Modernity has emerged as a dominant category to describe social transformations which have taken place and continue to take place for quite some time. Though modernity is being used extensively in social science literature, it continues to evade precise sociological understanding. What is modernity and how does one make sense of modernity are the issues which have been engaging the attention of social scientists for quite some time (Albrow 1996 : Alexander 1996 : Bauman 1991 and 2000 : Giddens 1990 : Gupta 2011 : Harvey 1989 : Pathak 2006 : Singh 1996, to mention only a few). I have attempted to deal with these questions and the related issue of social change and development elsewhere (Kumar 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012). Let me briefly recapitulate. It was argued, in tune with what Callinicos said, that there are three distinct ways of looking at modernity i.e. as a philosophical idea, as a form of society and as an experience (Callinicos 1999 : 297). As an idea, it represents a radical rupture with the past. It privileges progress, science, optimism and universality. It critiques superstitions, blind faith and pessimism. As a form of society it would be characterised by distinctive economic, political and social characteristics. As an experience, it is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it promises progress, happiness and advancement and on the other, it seeks to destroy everything we have and are known by. It introduces an element of uncertainty, risk and confusion.

What is common to all of them is their Eurocentric proclivity. They all looked at modernity as having emanated from Europe. The emergence of modernity was captured, as Bhambra argues, in terms of two aspects - rupture and difference (2007 : 1). Rupture understood in terms of a distinction between an agrarian past and the modern industrial present and difference in terms of a distinction between Europe and rest of the world. These two aspects were supposed to characterise modernity. Europe was said to have undergone the process of modernisation (modernity in action) from the fifteenth century and, it has been argued that this process would encapsulate the rest of the world sooner or later. Any society failing to become modern (if at all that is possible) would be regarded as 'deviant' in one sense or the other. What this means in

D. V. KUMAR, Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Umshing, Shillong – 793022, *E-mail: dv_kumar1@rediffmail.com*

essence is that the particularity of Europe gets privileged as the general and universal.

What this paper seeks to do is that it goes beyond a mere descriptive account of the story of modernity and contests the widely accepted position that Europe was the first and only home of modernity. It is pertinent to mention here that there have been some notable attempts in this direction in the recent past (for example, see Bhambra 2007).

A number of social theorists have argued relentlessly that Europe was the home of modernity. Alexender, for example, would argue that 'the transition to modernity within Western society provided 'a capacity for transformation unprecedented in the other civilisations of the world' (1995 : 1). Similarly one of the most celebrated social theorists in the recent past, Giddens takes the position that modernity has its 'roots in specific characteristics of European history — (with) few parallels in prior periods or in other cultural settings' (1990 : 174). Callinicos, the Marxist historian, looks at modernity as a specific kind of idea associated with a specific kind of society –the modern West (1999). Even the postmodernist theorists such as Seidman, who are otherwise supposed to be skeptical of any form of certainty, argue that modernity needs to be located in the distinctiveness of the culture of the modern West.

Recently there have been some attempts to counter such an Eurocentric, hegemonic and homogensing construction of modernity having emerged from Europe. Conceptual categories such as multiple modernities, global modernities, hybrid and entangled modernities have been used to provide an alternative perspective on modernity (Comaroffs 1993 : 1-18). But the problem with these categories is that they do not question the 'fact' of modernity having emerged in the West (Bhambra 2007 : 6). The West is seen as the original birthplace of modernity and modernity has travelled from the West to other parts of the world. Delanty, for example, argues that modernity emerged first in Europe and then spread to other parts of the world which have tried to adapt themselves to modernity depending upon their local traditions (2006 : 266-78). In the process they have tried to extricate themselves from the imprint of modernity that emerged in Europe. In the words of Bhambra, 'the concept of modernity, abstracted from its inflections or not, nonetheless remains tied to what is generally understood as the European experience' (2007 : 6). Therefore even these categories are not adequate in appreciating the varied and rich experience of modernity. Reducing it to only European experience does not do justice to the richness of the origin of modernity. We need to go beyond these categories too to be able to do that.

Contesting the Eurocentric Perspective

Why is it necessary to question the very 'fact' of modernity having emerged in Europe alone? It becomes necessary to do so because the supposedly

founding moments of modernity-the Renaissance, the French and Industrial Revolutions-which had taken place in Europe making it the 'supposed' birth place of modernity, after all, became what they were because of the support from rich and varied non-European sources. The contribution of non-West sources to these events has been ignored, perhaps intentionally if one may add. Further the transition of the so-called modernity from the West to the non-West occurred essentially through colonial encounters, a fact which has been conveniently ignored. In the sociological accounts of modernity, one does not find a sufficient mention of the role of colonialism in the transition of modernity from the West to the other parts of the world. This is despite that fact that colonial encounters have been a particularly painful experience for many.

Let us take a look at each of these events. Since the three most supposedly momentous events – the Renaissance, the French and Industrial Revolutions- which symbolize modernity occurred in Europe, it was argued that modernity began only from Europe. Questions regarding the contribution of other civilisations to modernity and the impact of colonial encounters on the non-West were completely ignored (Bhambra 2007). We try and deconstruct these events in order to show that Europe can not alone possibly claim the authorship of modernity.

The Renaissance understood in terms of rebirth was supposed to represent one of the key moments in modernity and since it took place in Europe, the natural corollary was that Europe became the birth place of modernity. As Toulmin argues, the 'Renaissance was evidently a transitional phase, in which the seeds of Modernity germinated and grew' (1990 : 23). For many historians, 'the significance of the Renaissance was that it was the beginning of the modern world' (Burke 1964 : 133). It was during this period that scholars were believed to have begun their journey of contemplating about the human condition and about humanism in general. That is why activities connected with such a contemplation became part of what came to be known as humanities. The strong belief was that the ancient texts had a wealth of wisdom to offer and it was through a creative and critical engagement with those texts that an appropriate understanding of the present could be obtained. Scholars such as Dante, Boccaccio and others were supposed to have inaugurated such a literary renaissance. These scholars were believed to have made tenacious attempts to learn what they could from great minds such as Plato and Aristotle by examining the ancient texts. The wealth of wisdom which was generated in the ancient period was said to be lost during the medieval period (the dark age). However, the point to be noted here is that the Renaissance scholars also wanted to move beyond what the ancient texts had to offer and evolve new and alternative ways of understanding the present. They were attempting new modes of thinking to enrich life in the present. They were not keen on repeating what was said in the ancient texts. They

were striving for something which was distinctive. As Ferguson would contend, 'the Renaissance was conceived as a period in the history of European civilization, a period with a distinctive spirit, sharply contrasted with that of the Middle ages' (1948 : 177). The tenacious attempts of the Renaissance scholars were believed to have resulted in significant advances in literature, art, architecture, science and geography. These advances were seen be to be responsible for a shift from their veneration of the ancient texts to a feeling of superiority over them (See Butzer 1992). The distinctive strands present within the Renaissance such as the discovery of the ancient texts, development of historical consciousness and humanism, vast improvements in the arts and science together with the discovery of the 'New' world made the Renaissance a very distinctive phase in the development of European history. This was supposed to have heralded the birth of modernity in Europe.

It was much later that the uniqueness of the Renaissance began to be seriously questioned and also the idea that Europe was the first and the only home of modernity. Scholars such as Kristeller argued that the Renaissance which was supposed to herald modernity in Europe by distinguishing itself from the medieval (dark) ages also contained some medieval traits (1974). Also the presence of earlier renaissances such as the Carolingian or twelfth century renaissance within Europe deeply problematised the uniqueness of the Renaissance (Sanford 1951 : Sullivan 1989). Further taking an objection to the uniqueness of the Renaissance and to the lack of any mention of contribution of Islamic scholars to the growth of humanities, Sabra argues that these scholars were equally, if not more, driven by the concerns of the Renaissance and those of later Humanist thinkers (1984 : 138). The intellectual contributions of Islamic scholars to learning and knowledge within Europe and their role transmitting writings of ancient civilizations such as Greek, Roman and Oriental have been widely recognised (Kraemer 1984 : Bernal 1987). As far as improvements in the arts were concerned, it was believed that these were effected as a result of travel only within Europe. Travelers travelling within Europe, it was assumed, only contributed to the refining of techniques in arts. As Bhambra points out, the editors of a recent collection of reprints maintain that between 1400 and 1700 there were over 250 descriptions of Egypt by Western scholars suggesting that travels to Egypt were at least as common as those to Greece (2007 : 97). What this clearly shows is that improvements in arts were effected as a result of travels not only within Europe but also between Europe and other parts, contesting the idea that the Renaissance was an exclusively European affair. Even the Western science which was claimed to be essentially an endogenous affair was in fact influenced by non-western sources. For example, Copernicus's mathematical astronomy drew heavily from Islamic scholars such as Nasir ad-Din at-Tusi and Ibn ash Shatir (Bernal 1987 : 156). The advantage that Copernicus perhaps had was that he had better access to texts as compared to his predecessors. What is missing in the account of Renaissance is the role of printing press which itself

originated in China in transmitting the cultural essence of the Renaissance. The printing press was carried to Europe in the Middle Ages by the Arabs, a fact which does not find any mention in the modernist accounts of the Renaissance (Gilmore 1952 : 187). This facilitated a shift from a scribal to a typographical culture producing fundamental changes in the prevailing intellectual models of continuity and change (Bhambra 2007 : 97). What has really happened is that in an account of birth and growth of modernity, Europe privileged itself and the 'other' (the non-west and non-Europe) has been systematically written out. It was much later that the dominant discourse which is found in sociological accounts about the modernity having first originated in Europe began to be contested by the historically-inclined sociologists.

Another momentous event which was used to claim that modernity emerged in Europe was the French Revolution. As the French Revolution led to the emergence of the nation-state which represents the political project of modernity, it has been emphasised that modernity took birth in Europe first. Furet refers to the role of French Revolution in inventing the political form of modernity or more succinctly, 'the empirical modality through which the world of free and equal individuals has made its appearance in our history' (1988 : 18). This event (i.e. the French Revolution) was seen as something which marked the advent of something unique and extraordinary, in short, the advent of modern political society. Nation-state became a reality following the French Revolution. There have been debates whether nations are modern or they had been present in the pre-modern times in the form of ethnies (Smith 1986). I have dealt with this elsewhere (Kumar 2010).

Apart from engendering the nation-state, what the French Revolution was said to have was that it created representative institutions, a Constitution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, and the Decree of 11th August abolishing feudalism. After taking birth in Europe, the nation-state which was the political form of modernity became global. It was argued that the spread of nation-state to the non-European world was part of a natural progression of world history. This account conveniently ignores the process through which the political form of modernity, i.e. nation-state, got transmitted. History would tell us that it was essentially through colonial encounters which were basically hegemonic and violent that the nation-state spread to other parts of the world. As Chatterjee argues that the issue of nation-state in the non-European world has to be understood as historically fused with colonialism (1986 : 30). Any discussion of the spread of nation-state must include the question of colonialism. Otherwise that discussion would be devoid of factual background and intellectual strength. It was because of colonial encounters that the nation-state spread to various parts of the world. It also needs to be mentioned here that some of the 'modern' political and governmental measures were first initiated in the colonies and then they were exported back to the

West. Fingerprinting, just to give one such example, which was seen as the 'scientific' means of locating an individual was first used in India by the colonial government in Bengal (Cohn and Dirks 1988 : 224-8). Further, as Viswanathan points out, it was in the colonies first that the English literature was introduced as a subject in the curriculum before being done so in the home country (1989 : 3). The point one wishes to make here is that the transmission of the nation-state seen as modern was not a natural progression as has been emphasised by the theorists of modernity. Rather it should be closely seen in conjunction with what was happening simultaneously, i.e. the spread of colonialism in the non-European world.

Yet another event which is supposed to have heralded the birth of modernity in Europe is the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution from 1750 to 1850 was believed to have produced a 'radical shift in the structure of the economy, in the composition of total output, and in the distribution of employment' (Harwell 1965 : 181), leading to the engendering of a distinctive type of economy not seen before. It constitutes a rupture between the traditional economy and the modern industrial economy. Since it was said to have occurred in Europe first, it came to be logically implied that modernity began its journey from Europe. The factors said to be responsible for the occurrence of Industrial Revolution are the growth of urban centres, commercial agriculture, technological innovations, the spread of banking and finance and a significant rise in population. In conjunction with each other they were said to have contributed to the process of industrialisation. Industrialisation would spread to non-European and non-Western parts of the world. Any society failing to become industrialised is considered deviant and would be unable to solve problems concerning low standard of life, illiteracy, ill-health and ignorance present in that society. Thus the spread of industrialisation to other parts is seen as a natural and inevitable process. What this account conveniently effaces is the existence of colonial and unequal trading relations characterizing the West and the non-West (Bhambra 2007 : 125). This shortcoming, however, is sought to be rectified to some extent by theorists such as Wallerstein, Frank and others. Wallerstein would argue that the emergence of Industrial Capitalism should be explained not only in terms of the factors mentioned above, but also in terms of the incorporation of non-capitalist systems and continuous exploitation of their resources for the development of capitalism systems (1979). Contrary to the widely-accepted perception that the success of industrial capitalism in Britain is endogenously created, achieved and maintained, some scholars would look at the impact of deindustrialisation of countries like India on the success of British industry (Washbrook 1997). Any explanation of the success of industrialisation in Europe in general must take into account the story of underdevelopment in rest of the world. Otherwise such an explanation would be empirically poor and historically untenable. As Eric Williams's brilliant account (1994) shows the 'triangular trade' between Britain and France, Africa and colonial America was an important source of

capital accumulation which finally led to the financing of the Industrial Revolution. He argues that, 'the slave ships sailed from the home country with a cargo of manufactured goods. These were exchanged at a profit on the coast of Africa for Negroes, who were traded on the plantations, at another profit, in exchange for a cargo of colonial produce to be taken back to the home country' (1994 : 51-2). Theorists such as Samir Amin (1977) and Andre Gunder Frank (1975 : 386-93) give us powerful arguments as to why the process of industralisation should not be viewed purely as an endogenous affair to Europe. Frank, for example argues that, 'the conditions for the rise of the West to hegemony and the transition to capitalism in Europe cannot be found within Europe alone : they have to be sought in the world as a whole' (1992 : 390). Fundamentally, the logical point is that if world system has to be taken as a given fact, why should Europe be taken as the centre of the world? One can not simply ignore considerable scholarly work which has been done on the long history of complex interconnections and negotiations between peoples across both sea and land (Das Gupta 1985 : Perlin 1994 : Subrahmanyam 1988. The essential point that emerges is that the development of any socio-economic process in any part of the world should not be seen as an isolated affair. The network of relations across the globe which has been a historical fact needs to be factored in to account for the advent of modernity.

The main burden of argument ably advanced by some of the social theorists such as Bhambra in the recent past is that privileging Europe as the home of modernity, without considering the contribution of other parts of the world, as we have seen above, is deeply problematic. The histories of imperialism, colonialism and slavery need to be given due attention in accounting for the growth and spread of modernity (Bhambra 2007 : 145). It is these histories which enabled Europe and the West to achieve modernity. The multiple forms of engagement between Europe and other parts of the world need to be recognised in any account of growth of modernity in Europe.

The search for an authentic origin of modernity is an extremely arduous and, if I may say, a meaningless task, because of complex nature of interconnections and relations that evolved over a long period of time among different parts of the world. What was said to have been European in origin could have been borrowed from any part of the world—Asia, Africa and so on, illustrations of which have been given above. Because of hegemony that Europe enjoyed, intellectual or otherwise, over the rest of the world, it has been able to hegemonise the debate about the origin of modernity. Bhambra nicely captures the contours of debate in the following words, 'When it was 'proved' that someone else had invented it, the origin rested in the application of a thing (e.g. the invention of the printing press is attributed to the Chinese but claimed as European as a consequence of its replication). When it was 'proved' that someone else had also used it, then origin rested in the mass application of a thing (e.g. factory production of cotton). When it was 'proved' the someone

else had also mass produced it, the origin rested in the claim to have done it first. First and alone' (2007 : 150).

The fact of modernity having emerged in Europe first and alone needs to be problematised. The notion of 'connected histories' (Subrahmanyam 1997) enables us to have better appreciation of the trajectory which modernity has traversed. It is a valuable analytical tool to understand and locate the growth of modernity. This takes into account the contribution of other civilizations and societies to advent of modernity and seeks to delegitimise the European hegemonic idea that modernity emerged there 'first and alone'. A more detailed treatment of the idea of 'connected histories' would be undertaken in due course of time.

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