

Christian Smith, “ON MULTIPLE MODERNITIES: SHIFTING THE MODERNITY PARADIGM,” unpublished paper, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, © 2006.

by Christian Smith, Professor of Sociology, University of Notre Dame, and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Notre Dame

The Background of Modernity. If the social sciences in the last 150 years have had a master theoretical frame to organize their focus, problems, explanations, and interpretations, it has been the key idea of “modernity.” Theories in all of the social sciences have long been organized around the pre-modern/modern divide, seeking to understand the institutional and cultural transformations from the one to the other. In sociology, for instance, the crucial works by Marx, Tönnies, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Parsons, and many others explored processes of economic growth, differentiation, rationalization, individualization, urbanization, and so on, as central dynamics of a theorized process of modernization. Anthropology, likewise, was defined as a discipline per se, until near the end of the last Century, by the very constitutive idea of the existence and interest of “traditional,” pre-modern tribes, societies, and cultures—in contrast to the societies of modernity.

Particularly important is the fact that all such social science theorists and theories unvaryingly believed that modernity was unavoidably destructive of religion, belief in spiritual realities and objective universals, non-naturalistic metaphysics, and “traditional” cultures and perspectives generally. Modernity always contained acids, it was widely believed, that are necessarily secularizing, disenchanting, and fostering of a naturalistic and materialist outlook. By theoretical definition, religious faith and belief in such things as natural laws became cognitively deviant, and were expected certainly to fade away with the progress of time and the advance of modernity.

This inherited central focus of the social sciences on modernity took a particularly sharp and systematized form after World War II. The second half of the Twentieth Century saw the development of social science theories that posited modernity and modernization as largely universal, uniform, predictable, and inevitable dynamics inexorably transforming the world. In sociology, Talcott Parsons theorized universal “pattern variables” and processes of evolutionary development of differentiation organizing the process of modernization. In economics, W.W. Rostow theorized the “Five Stages of Economic Growth” through which all societies would pass in order to develop and modernize. An entire “Economic and Social Development” industry worked for decades under such theoretical notions. Thus, until as late as the 1970s, a very particular theoretical model for understanding modernity and modernization dominated much of the social sciences. And this model continues to exert powerful effects in the social sciences through its residual background assumptions and models of thought—even when individual social scientists were or are not “modernization” scholars.

Especially relevant for present purposes is the fact that this model *assumed that modernity and modernization are not only inevitable and inexorable, but also that modernity produces predictable patterns of uniformity and standardization*—which, it turns out, resembles the particular experience of Western Europe. Although many scholars have rejected such an approach, such a view is by no means entirely disbelieved even today, as the writings of scholars from Ronald Inglehart to Steve Bruce (and even, in a sense, Francis Fukuyama) attest. Again, a key element of the uniformity that modernity is believed to engender is the necessary and inevitable abandonment of religion, spirituality, objective universals, and non-naturalistic metaphysics.

Multiple Modernities. Numerous developments in recent decades have opened up an important theoretical space for the reconsideration of modernity in more empirically realistic and

metaphysically open terms. In particular, newly emergent on the theoretical horizon is the thesis of “multiple modernities,” which is now being articulated by the likes of S.N. Eisenstadt, Charles Taylor, David Martin, Peter Wagner, and others. The essential idea behind the multiple modernities thesis is that “modernity” and its features and forces can actually be received, developed, and expressed in significantly different ways in different parts of the world, and—this being my current addition—by different communities living in single societies. Thus, while the long-observed forces of modernization still operate through powerful historical changes around the globe, the original thesis of uniformity and standardization, including the related secularization thesis, are suspended if not rejected. In other words, it is possible for different societies and subcultures to be truly modern and yet not end up looking like, say, France or Sweden with regard to religion, culture, morality, and views of science and metaphysics.

This simple yet fundamental, even radical, change in the old assumptions, images, and expectations about modernity and modernization opens up at this moment a crucial opportunity for rethinking, re-theorizing, and re-framing our empirical analyses in the social sciences, particularly with regard to religion. This opportunity creates the conditions for something of a potential paradigm shift in social science (and, in due time, popular) understandings of the actual nature of the world in which we live. And this can foster a variety of changes, including perhaps reinvigorating and advancing work in the sociology of religion.

What, then, are the developments in recent decades that I said have brought us to this moment? They include:

1. The emergence of Japan in the 1980s as a global economic powerhouse which, nonetheless, did not simply come to conform culturally or socially to the Western European model.
2. A growing disenchantment in many sectors, particularly as expressed in “postmodernism,” with Modernity in the latter Twentieth Century that, though not all aspects of which were particularly smart or salutary (e.g., postmodernist anti-humanism and relativism), did focus useful reconsiderations of the particular historical and cultural situated-ness of the modern project. (Note that the thesis of multiple modernities enables us to move beyond the false strictures of “modernity” without having to fall into the serious problems of postmodernism, not to mention an unhelpful nostalgia for pre-modern times and conditions.)
3. The larger economic and cultural fact of globalization and its consequences, which has raised basic questions about the relationship between modernization and Westernization, suggesting possible alternative forms of something like an “Asian Modernity,” as well as casting into some doubt the future of the nation-state which was so central to the modern project.
4. The reality of (in many ways, at least—although this is precisely what is being reconsidered) numerous modern Islamic and quasi-Islamic states and societies (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran, Oman, etc.) which appear to be appropriating modernity more selectively and applying it in more customized fashion than traditional modernization theory would have expected. More broadly, fairly recent so-called “post-colonial” and “subaltern” studies in academia have driven home a similar point about the capacities for resistance and alteration by local and subjugated cultures.

5. Current developments in China, a country which is clearly economically modernizing in many ways at an unbelievable rate yet, again, does not seem to be simply evolving inexorably toward conformity to a Western European model.
6. The diverse paths that post-communist states and societies appear to be forging with regard to their own religious futures, particularly around the role of religion in public life.
7. The growing force of terrorism, which routinely uses all sorts of modern technology to promote often “anti-modern” agendas.
8. The complication of what was once taken to be a straightforward secularization theory by the empirical fact of the widespread continuation of “traditional” religion both in the U.S. (perhaps the most modern nation on earth) and, as Philip Jenkins and others have shown, in much of the Global South.
9. The experience of many traditional Muslims actually living in urban centers of Western Europe who, by all accounts, are very selectively adopting “Western” ways, even if they seek to be and understand themselves to be entirely “modern”—as recent disruptive events in Paris have demonstrated.

The point here is not that all of these facts and events are to be praised, nor that they decisively refute the standard model of modernization that posited inexorability and movement to uniformity. (“True believers” in the extant model of modernity simply counsel confident patience, believing that, inevitably, a homogenizing modernization process of secularization will eventually work its logic out.) The point is simply that real world facts and events have in recent years forced a serious reconsideration of the received model of modernity. Again, one response has been to retrench and defend the model—a reaction I find parochial and unhelpful. Another has been the anti-modern protest of swinging way out into some form of postmodernism—a response I also find to be intellectually self-defeating and morally bankrupt. But now, in the last five years, a serious third alternative has surfaced: the thesis of multiple modernities. However dramatically innovative or not the idea of multiple modernities per se is judged to be—and I recognize differences of views on this—I am nonetheless convinced that it provides a most helpful and promising theoretical way to frame and interpretively explain the vast body of empirical knowledge that has accumulated in recent decades about the failure of the “inevitable and homogenizing” version of modernization theory.

The handful of scholars currently thinking about the idea have not formulated a coherent and well-developed theory of multiple modernities, but their statements are highly suggestive. Charles Taylor, for instance, observes that a cultural approach to modernity appreciates that,

Transitions to what we might recognize as modernity, taking place in different civilizations, will produce different results, reflecting their divergent starting points. Their understandings of the person, social relations, states of mind, goods and bads, virtues and vices, sacred and profane, are likely to be distinct. The future of the world will be one in which all societies will undergo change, in institutions and outlook, and for some these changes will be parallel, but it will not converge, because new differences will emerge from the old. Thus, instead of speaking of “modernity” in the singular, we should better speak of “multiple modernities.”

Similarly, S.N. Eisenstadt writes that,

Modernity is an open-ended horizon in which there are spaces for multiple interpretations. This immediately implies a critique of totalizing theories of modernity.... I want to argue that it is modernity which makes it possible for radically plural world-interpretations to be expressed openly, and it is for this reason that the field in which human beings live necessarily becomes a field of tensions.... Modernity's openness to interpretation makes necessary a concept of the plurality of modernities.

This lack of development itself suggests that more work needs to be done to explore, develop, and synthesize the best thinking on multiple modernities.

Nevertheless, we can still observe for present purposes some of the key ideas underlying the "multiple modernities" thesis, to give at least a preliminary sense of the assumptions and approach; they are:

1. That a sound understanding of modernity must reject older social-evolutionary and functionalist assumptions about social change which cast certain processes as universal and inevitable. In their stead, assumptions about the centrality of contingency, complexity, timing, and context—which themselves reflect deeper assumptions about human agency and freedom—are adopted.
2. That "modernity" itself is not a simple coherent unity, but in certain key ways an internally conflicted movement. For example, contained within the single project of modernity are strong tendencies toward both autonomy and control. On the one hand, modernity liberates individuals from the constraining bonds of tradition, generating a multiplicity of options that give rise to choice and pluralism. At the same time, modernity imposes certain forms of discipline, uniformity, rationalization, and social control that counter individual liberation. Most early sociological theorists were aware, at least in some ways, of such complexities, contradictions, and unintended consequences involved in the processes of modern social change. What remains to develop, however, is a fuller understanding about the implications of how this internally-contradictory and "unstable compound" nature of modernity shapes prospects for multiplicity and diverse outcomes.
3. That it is essential to an understanding of modernity as not simply a series of institutional changes, which positive science can somehow track and predict, but as a cultural project of purposive human agents operating from the start with different categories and beliefs about humanity, society, morality, purpose of life, etc. This cultural dimension of modernity opens up possibilities for dramatic differences that the older institutionally-focused theories of modernity could not appreciate.
4. That, I suggest, rather than working with an underlying positivist empiricist model of social science, we ought to adopt instead the approach of critical realism, which conceives of societies as open systems in which multiple and complex real (though perhaps directly unobservable) causal forces operate interactively to produce distinct outcomes.
5. That modernity needs to be understood every bit as much as a *cultural* entity as it is a "structural" fact. By reflecting social science's "cultural turn" in this way, the multiple modernities thesis opens up new possibilities for considering ranges of options that modern people and societies might take when it comes to matters of religion, science, and morality.

6. That much of what has been promoted by the received modernization model is actually less a scientific description of actual processes of social change, but rather more a particular normative (anti-religious, sceptical Enlightenment) ideology of “Progress” and the good society (secular) masquerading as objective social science. Having unmasked the normative and ideological biases baked into standard theories of modernity, we will stand in a much better position to conduct open, relatively objective, empirical and analytical social science that better interprets the operations of the real social world.

Yet the multiple modernities thesis is, to date, still largely a promising suggestion, an idea just now beginning to be mapped out more systematically in preliminary ways. What needs to happen to realize this thesis’ promise is to better explore, assess, develop, and promote it—particularly by and among U.S. social scientists who seem nearly universally oblivious to this nascent approach. The following publications can serve as a resource to that end.

Core Theoretical Statements

- Eisenstadt, S.E. 2000, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus*, Winter, 129(1): 1-29. (Note: the entire issue of *Daedalus*, Winter, 129(1) is devoted to “Multiple Modernities.”)
- Kaya, Ibrahim, 2004, “Modernity, Openness, Interpretation: a Perspective on Multiple Modernities,” *Social Science Information*, 43(1): 35-57.
- Martin, David, 2005, *On Secularization: Toward a Revised General Theory*. Haunts (UK) and Burlington (VT): Ashgate.
- Wagner, Peter, 2000, “Modernity—One or Many?,” *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology*, Judith Blau (Ed.), Oxford: Blackwell.

Related Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

- Arnason, Johann, 1989, “The Imaginary Constitution of Modernity,” in *Autonomie et Autotransformation de la Société*, Giovanni Busino (Ed.), Geneva: Droz.
- Arnason, Johann, 1991, “Modernity as a Project and as a Field of Tension,” in *Communicative Action*, Axel Honneth and Hans Joas (Eds.), Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Arnason, Johann, S.N. Eisenstadt, and Bjoern Wittrock (eds.), 2004, *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Brill.
- Berger, Peter and Samuel P. Huntington (Eds.), 2003, *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davie, Grace, 2002, *Europe—The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Delanty, Gerard, 1999, *Social Theory in a Changing World: Conceptions of Modernity*, Polity Press.
- Eisenstadt, S.N., 2003, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities (2 Vols.)*, Brill Academic.
- Friese, Heidrun and Peter Wagner, 2000, “When ‘The Light of the Great Cultural Problems Moves On’: On the Possibility of a Cultural Theory of Modernity,” *Thesis Eleven*, 61 (May): 25-40.
- Kamali, [Masoud](#), 2006, *Multiple Modernities, Civil Society, and Islam: The Case of Iran and Turkey*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Kaya, Ibrahim, 2003, *Social Theory and Later Modernities*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

- Lau, Jenny Kwon Wah (Ed.), 2003, *Multiple Modernities: Cinemas and Popular Media in Transcultural East Asia*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Roniger, [Luis Roniger](#) and [Carlos Waisman](#) (Eds.), 2002, *Globality and Multiple Modernities: Comparative North American and Latin American Perspectives*, Sussex Academic Press.
- Peter J. Katzenstein, 2006, "Multiple Modernities as Limits to Secular Europeanization?," in Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J Katzenstein (eds.), *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Therborn, Goeran, 2003, "Entangled Modernities," *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6(3): 293-305.
- Taylor, Charles, 2004, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Taylor, Charles, 2005, "A Catholic Modernity?," in *A Catholic Modernity?*, James Heft (Ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 13-37.
- Taylor, Charles and Benjamin Lee, n.d., "Multiple Modernities Project: Modernity and Difference," unpublished paper, <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/transcult/promad.html>
- Wagner, Peter 1993, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline*, Routledge.
- Wagner, Peter, 2001, "Modernity: History of the Concept," *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Neil Smelser and Paul Baltes (eds.), New York: Elsevier, pp. 9949-9954.
- Wagner, Peter, 2001, *Theorizing Modernity: Inescapability and Attainability in Social Theory*, Sage.
- Yack, Bernard, 1997, *The Fetishism of Modernities: Epochal Self-Consciousness in Contemporary Social and Political Thought*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Related Background Theoretical and Empirical Materials

- Bell, Daniel, 1976, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, New York: Basic Books.
- Berger, Peter, 1974, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*, New York: Vintage.
- Berger, Peter, 1977, *Facing Up to Modernity*, New York: Basic Books.
- Berger, Peter (Ed.), 1999, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Casanova, José, 1994, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [Chakrabarty](#), Dipesh, 2002, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- Davie, Grace, 2000, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fowler, Robert Booth, 1989, *Unconventional Partners: Religion and Liberal Culture in the United States*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Gertrude Himmelfarb, 2004, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments*, New York: Knopf.
- Hunter, James, 1981, "The New Religions: Demodernization and the Protest against Modernity," in Bryan Wilson (Ed.), *Impact of New Religious Movements*, New York: Rose of Sharon Press, pp. 1-20.
- Hunter, James, 1994, "What is Modernity? Historical Roots and Contemporary Features," in Sampson, P., Samuel, V., and Sugden, C. (Eds.), *Faith and Modernity*, Oxford: Regnum, pp. 16-18.
- [Kolakowski](#), Leszek, 1997, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

- Larrain, Jorge, 1993, "Modernity," in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth Century Social Thought*, William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore (eds.), Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 391-394.
- Tiryakian, Edward, 1996, "Three Meta-Cultures of Modernity: Christian, Gnostic, Chthonic," *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 13(1): 99-118.
- Wagner, Peter, 2001, *A History and Theory of the Social Sciences: Not All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Sage.

Appendix: On Critical Realism, Science, Religion, and Modernity

The human and social sciences have for the last many years been caught in an unproductive impasse between two radically different background philosophies of science. On the one hand, strongly residual forms of positivist empiricism have dominated social science, led by those seeking a strongly naturalistic, "scientistic" approach to their disciplines. The underlying key assumptions are (1) that the social sciences are not essentially different from the natural sciences (unity of science), (2) that only observables may count as real existent entities (empiricism), (3) that reality, including human consciousness ultimately, consists only of matter and energy (naturalism), (4) that science should be about measuring regular associations between variables (Humean causation), and (5) that "the" scientific method offers the only reliable means to acquiring positive, valid knowledge about reality. Each of these assumptions is problematic on a variety of grounds. However, they still dominate the background intuitions and assumptions of the mainstream of most of the human and social sciences. Very many individual social scientists are not particularly consciously reflective about these philosophical assumptions, but are nonetheless highly influenced by them in their work. This is the dominant position.

Against this naturalistic positivist empiricism has arisen in recent decades a strong postmodernist constructivist movement of thought. Although this postmodernist alternative—which is very strong in much of the humanities—has captured less ground in the social sciences, it has still, as positivist empiricism's theoretical alter-ego, been quite influential in broadly structuring the fundamental framework of debate in the human and social sciences about its own purpose and nature. Postmodernist constructivism has capitalized upon the many intellectual flaws and naiveté of its positivist empiricist rival. In this way, numerous of its critiques are actually accurate and critically helpful. But the "constructive" alternative that postmodern constructivism advances is in crucial ways even more intellectually and morally problematic than the dominant view it attacks. Central to the postmodernist constructivist perspective are the beliefs (1) that reality is not objectively existent but ultimately a human construction, (2) that human language is the ultimate force governing perception and reality-construction, (3) that human beings are not integrally existent persons but mere "sites" constructed by the operation of power and discourse, and (4) that the human "sciences" are not about the study of real social entities and processes but rather the deconstructive analysis of the power-fraught discourses operating through human sociality.

The current debate governing the larger reflexive self-understandings of the human and social sciences is—as one can well imagine—misguided, hopeless, and sterile. Essentially, two failed philosophies of social science are deadlocked in struggle to control the future of the human and social sciences. Neither, in fact, merits any influence. The inherited debate mis-frames the issues, problems, and possibilities, and so generates useless conflict and, consequently, widespread apathy among social scientists about critical reflection on the larger nature and purposes of their disciplines. As a result, most social scientists respond by putting their heads into the sand of incessant empirical data gathering and analysis.

The philosophy of critical realism provides the opportunity to break this impasse. Critical realism is based on and advances a number of crucial assumptions and beliefs that provide a much

more solid foundation for the human sciences than the alternatives. Among them are the assumptions and beliefs that: (1) a real world exists objective to our consciousness of it (ontological realism); (2) humans are equipped to know this real world accurately but not perfectly (fallibilistic epistemological confidence); (3) reality is stratified, existing in multiple levels and “layers” of interdependence (stratification); (4) real causal properties and capacities emerge from lower levels yet are not reducible to them (non-reductionistic emergence); (5) real entities of many kinds possess real causal powers or capacities to make things happen in the world (causal realism); (6) in principle, there is no reason why beyond physical and mental facts and principles there could not also exist normative, moral, and spiritual or supernatural facts and principles (metaphysical complexity); (7) science employs a multiplicity of means by which to understand and explain reality (scientific and methodological pluralism); (8) in addition to induction and deduction, both retrodution (the inference from actual phenomena to structural causes, the transition in theoretical explanation from manifest phenomena to their generating mechanisms), retrodiction (the inference from events to antecedent causes, the transition in practical explanation from resolved components of a complex to antecedent causes), and abduction (reasoning procedures aimed at coming up with good hypotheses to explain observed cases, technically a syllogism or form of argument in which the major is evident, but the minor is only probable) are legitimate and important rational means of explaining reality; (9) fact and value need not be radically separated in all ways in science, since the best of science itself presupposes normative values, such as the goodness of truth (fact-value reconnection).

Much work remains to be done to develop the practical implications of critical realism for the social sciences, but numerous possibilities emerge immediately: (1) critical realism provides the social scientist with confidence in the reality of causation; (2) critical realism insists that social scientists not only demonstrate significant associations between variables but also specify the causal mechanisms that explain the relation between those variables; (3) critical realism uniquely introduces into the social sciences the absolutely crucial insight about emergence and emergent properties that explains ontological realism and stratification and provides a basis for taking seriously the real existence of causal properties at various levels without resorting to reductionistic and conflationary strategies to explain them away by appeals to lower-levels of reality; (4) critical realism legitimately opens up doors to explore both fact-value questions and questions regarding the relationship between science and religion; (5) critical realism clearly defeats the worst aspects of anti-scientific postmodernism; (6) critical realism undercuts tendencies in science toward disciplinary and methodological imperialism; (7) critical realism opens up new territory in scientific explanation, normally ruled illegitimate by its rivals, by its reasoned sanctioning of retrodution, retrodiction, and abduction in social science explanations. That these and many more advantages and opportunities adhere in the critical realist program. Toward exploring and developing critical realism, I suggest the following publications:

Critical Realism in Social Science and Theology: An Essential Bibliography

- Archer, Margaret, Andrew Collier, Douglas Porpora, 2004, *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God*, New York: Routledge.
- Archer, Margaret, 1995, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, Margaret, 2000, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, Margaret et al. (eds.), 1998, *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, New York: Routledge.

- Collier, Andrew, 2004, *On Christian Belief: A Defence of a Cognitive Conception of Religious Belief in a Christian Context*, New York: Routledge.
- Collier, Andrew, 1994, *Critical Realism: an Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy*, London: Verso.
- Cruickshank, J., 2002, *Realism and Sociology: Anti-Foundationalism, Ontology, and Social Research*, New York: Routledge.
- Bhaskar, Roy, 1997, *A Realist Concept of Science*, London: Verso.
- Bhaskar, Roy, 1998, *Critical Realism*, New York: Routledge.
- Eckstrom, Mats et al., 2002, *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, New York: Routledge.
- The *Journal of Critical Realism*, Mervyn Hartwig, Editor, Journal of Critical Realism, 37 Stockwell Green, Stockwell, London SW9 9HZ.
- Lopez, Jose and Garry Potter (Eds.), 2005, *After Postmodernism: An Introduction To Critical Realism*, Harrisburg, PA: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Sayer, Andrew, 2000, *Realism and Social Science*, New York: Sage Publications.
- Sayer, Andrew, 1992, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*, New York: Routledge.