

# Modernity's 'elusiveness'

## Reply to Tiryakian

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### Introduction

In his response to my critical commentary on SN Eisenstadt's 'Modernity and modernization', Edward Tiryakian raises two issues that I wish to briefly address in this reply: first, the question of whether the case of Japan can be used for illustrating the fruitfulness of Eisenstadt's multiple modernities approach, and second, the need to explicate one's understanding of the concept of modernity in discussions of modernization and modernity.

### Reply

The reference to Japan is well chosen as Eisenstadt himself has repeatedly emphasized its centrality for debates about the similarities or dissimilarities of modern countries, arguing Japan exhibits fundamental differences from the West. Since I have dealt with this issue at greater length elsewhere, all I will say here is that empirical comparisons between Japan (or the East Asian region more generally) and western countries that look at aspects of societal organization which matter from the viewpoint of modernization theory, the theory Eisenstadt claims to have refuted, yield no such differences (Schmidt, 2006, 2011). Therefore, Eisenstadt's attempt to demonstrate the superiority of the multiple modernities approach using the Japanese case as an example is a failure. I believe this critique holds water regardless of what conceptual stand one takes on modernization theory.

My critique does not invalidate the multiple modernities approach as such. A case could still be made for such an approach, but it would have to be stood on firmer ground than the banal observation of cultural and institutional diversity. To provide the

requisite foundations is the task of those who propose and defend the approach though, not mine.

My own understanding of modernity and modernization differs from both modernization theory and the multiple modernities school. In line with the sociological classics, I treat modernity as the latest of just a few great stages of societal evolution that have thus far emerged in the history of humankind. Underlying this conceptualization is the assumption that the modern revolution transforms all aspects of life, on a par only with the Neolithic revolution that set in some 10,000 years earlier.

In contrast to what past observers are said to have believed, I consider modernization to be an open-ended, non-linear process of self-propelling change. The term itself is meant to reflect modernity's processual side, its dynamism and restless reinvention.

My point of departure for capturing modernity's core features is Talcott Parsons' (1977) distinction between society, culture, person and (behavioral) organism. The choice of this analytic scheme is motivated by its heuristic value: it allows us to construe modernization as a multidimensional process, with change in all four dimensions interrelated and interdependent, yet in each case following a distinct logic. The foremost characteristic of *societal* modernization, on this view, is the substitution of functional differentiation for hierarchical or stratificatory differentiation as the primary mode of societal organization. *Cultural* modernization is associated with processes of rationalization and value generalization, with the diffusion of secular norms, and with the awareness of the malleability (hence contingency) of institutional arrangements. Modernization of the *person* gives rise to activist selves, reflexive identities, increasing

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individuation and enhanced cognitive capacities. And modernization of the *organism* is characterized by the disciplining and optimization/perfectioning of the body.

This scheme, while offering sufficient space for addressing the phenomena that attract the interest of multiple modernists and modernization theorists, is conceptually broader than either approach. This is particularly evident in the field of societal modernity. Following the premises of methodological nationalism, both approaches equate 'societies' with nation-states, thus treating territorially defined entities as more or less complete, self-contained enclosures. In mainstream sociology, methodological nationalism typically gives rise to two forms of reductionism: (1) *political* reductionism, which induces analysts to view modern society through the prism of its political system (as when it is referred to as a 'democratic', 'authoritarian', etc. society); and (2) *economic* reductionism, which considers society through the lenses of its economic system (as evidenced by the language of 'capitalist', 'socialist', etc. society). Multiple modernists lean toward the former; modernization theorists tend to oscillate between both forms of reductionism.

Conceptualizing modern society as a functionally differentiated society provides the means for overcoming either, as well as for expanding the horizon of sociological analysis beyond the confines of political units. Thus, following Luhmann (1997), I treat contemporary society as a singular world society that is differentiated into an unspecified (because historically variable) number of function systems (such as the political, economic, legal, scientific, educational, religious, etc. systems), all of which employ their own rationalities and whose modes of societalization are inherently globalizing, thus transcending local (including state) boundaries. This enables us to better understand the workings of the world economy, of world science, of world politics, of world religions, of world law, of world(wide) education, etc. that are discussed in various branches of the globalization literature but still await proper theorizing.

## Conclusion

There are other ways in which my scheme diverges not only from the multiple modernities school and modernization theory, but also from the theories of Parsons, Luhmann and other scholars on whose work it draws. Space precludes a sufficiently elaborate exposition here. Moreover, the scheme itself is still in a rather early, provisional state of development, so all I can do at the moment is point the interested reader to a first, preliminary sketch (Schmidt, 2012). But I do agree with Tiryakian that analytically coming to terms with (contemporary global) modernity is a desideratum of the highest order. So let us jointly work toward accomplishing it; not least by benefiting from each other's criticism.

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