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# Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity

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# Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity<sup>1</sup>

Rogers Brubaker

The notion of multiple modernities has been central to sophisticated discussions of modernity in recent years. Proponents of this notion sharply distinguish their understanding of modernity from that of mid-century modernization theory. While midcentury theorists envisioned a convergence around a single, originally Western pattern of institutions and cultural understandings, contemporary theorists of multiple modernities reject the notion of convergence and emphasize the irreducible multiplicity of institutional patterns and cultural and political programs and models.

Ethnicity, nationalism, and the nation-state have figured centrally in discussions of multiple modernity. Mid-century modernization theorists are said to have had a radically mistaken understanding of these subjects. They are said to have dismissed ethnicity (along with religion) as a vestigial private matter, of no public significance; to have treated nationalism as axiomatically civic, secular, and inclusive; and to have vastly overemphasized the power of the nation-state to bind loyalties and generate attractive and inclusive national identities. The multiple modernities perspective, by contrast, is held to offer a superior understanding of the contemporary resurgence of politicized

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally written for a conference on “Multiple Modernities at the Beginning of XXI Century.” It has been published in Italian as “Nazionalismo, etnicità et modernità” in Consuelo Corradi and Donatella Pacelli, eds., *Dalla modernità alle modernità multiple* (Soveria Mannelli, Italy: Rubbettino, 2011), pp. 83-93

ethnicity; of the persistence of ethnic, religious, and otherwise exclusive forms of nationalism; and of the limited and variable integrative power of the nation-state.

The multiple modernities literature has provided rich and sophisticated accounts of modernity and has made a major contribution to the revitalization of the study of modernity. A case can be made, however, for the continued relevance of the notion of a "single modernity." I sketch the outline of such case in this paper, focusing on the domain of ethnicity, nationalism, and the nation-state. The argument is in three parts. I begin by identifying a paradoxical feature of the multiple modernities argument; I then seek to qualify the familiar critique of the failures of modernization theory with respect to ethnicity, nationalism, and the nation-state; and I conclude by outlining the advantages of a "single modernity" perspective on nationalism and politicized ethnicity.

### **Modernity: one or many?<sup>2</sup>**

Two analytically distinct questions are central to the multiple modernities argument. The first is the question of convergence. Do contemporary societies converge around a single institutional pattern or a single cultural-political program or model?<sup>3</sup> Or do we see the persistence or indeed the emergence of multiple institutional patterns and multiple cultural and political programs and models? The collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War occasioned a renewed appreciation of modernization theory and

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<sup>2</sup> The section heading is borrowed from Bjorn Wittrock, "Modernity: One, None, or Many? European Origins and Modernity as Global Condition," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (Winter 2000). While acknowledging the multiplicity of institutional forms and cultural programs, Wittrock defends the notion of modernity as a single global condition, though he does so from a perspective different from that developed here.

<sup>3</sup> For mid-century modernization theory and convergence arguments, see Talcott Parsons, *The Evolution of Societies* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966); Marion Levy, *Modernization and the Structure of Society* (Princeton University Press, 1966); Alex Inkeles, *One World Emerging? Convergence and Divergence in Industrial Societies* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988).

a revival of the notion of convergence.<sup>4</sup> But that revival was short-lived; and while qualified versions of convergence arguments continue to be advanced today,<sup>5</sup> few theorists today endorse the sweeping mid-century arguments that projected a convergence around specifically western institutional patterns and cultural and political programs. There is broad agreement on the enduring significance of multiple institutional patterns in political, economic, legal, religious, and other domains, as well as multiple --and in many contexts sharply differing -- cultural and political programs and models.

The second question concerns the modernity of these multiple institutional patterns and cultural and political programs. Should some be characterized as modern, others as traditional or anti-modern? Can they be ranked by their degree of modernity? Or are they all equally modern, representing not differing *degrees* of modernity, but differing *kinds* of modernity? The contrast between tradition and modernity remains common in journalism and public argument, and some empirical research projects continue to operationalize modernity in a way that allows ranking of different societies on a scale of modernity. But many, perhaps most comparative historical scholars today would hesitate to rank varying institutional arrangements on a scale of modernity. And there is a broad consensus among scholars that precisely the most vehemently anti-modern and expressly "traditionalist" cultural and political programs are not "traditional" in any useful analytic sense, but are best understood as distinctively modern, at least in certain respects.

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<sup>4</sup> See the wide-ranging account of Jeffrey Alexander, "Modern, Anti, Post and Neo," *New Left Review* I/210, March-April 1995, 63-101; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992)

<sup>5</sup> John Meyer, "The World Polity and the Authority of the Nation-State." Pp. 41-70 in *Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society, and the Individual*, eds. George M. Thomas, John W. Meyer, and Francisco O. Ramirez (Newbury Park: Sage, 1987); Robert Marsh, "Convergence in Relation to Level of Societal Development," *Sociological Quarterly* 49 (2008): 797-824.

But by what criteria are expressly anti-modern cultural and political programs or social movements characterized as distinctively modern? The answer given by Shmuel Eisenstadt, the most persuasive proponent of the multiple modernities thesis, goes something like this.<sup>6</sup> Putatively anti-modern programs and movements are in fact characteristically modern in at least three ways. They are modern, first, in their reflexivity, that is in their sense of a range of alternative social and political possibilities that could be realized "through autonomous human agency."<sup>7</sup> Second, such programs and movements are modern in what Eisenstadt calls their "highly political and ideological" character, in their modalities of protest and institution-building. Third, they are modern in what he calls their "Jacobinism," by which he means their commitment to the "total reconstruction of personality, [and] of individual and collective identities, [through] conscious ...political action."

This is certainly an interesting argument. But this is where the paradox comes in. Eisenstadt appeals to an understanding of a single modernity in order to validate his argument about multiple modernities. On one level, there are multiple modernities; but on another, more fundamental and abstract level, there is only one modernity. The notion of a single modernity would seem to be more fundamental analytically, for this is what allows Eisenstadt to characterize a wide range of institutional patterns and cultural and political models, programs, and movements – even avowedly antimodern ones -- as "modern."

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<sup>6</sup> S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (Winter 2000). See especially pp. 3-4, 15, 19, and 21.

<sup>7</sup> On reflexivity see also Wittrock, op. cit.; Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization* (Polity Press, 1994); and, for a critique of Beck et al, Jeffrey Alexander, "Critical Reflections on 'Reflexive Modernization,'" *Theory, Culture & Society* 13 (2006) :133–8.

Eisenstadt himself does not always seem fully comfortable with the language of "multiple modernities," and there are suggestions in his work of an alternative analytical language. He writes, for example, of the "continuous development of...multiple interpretations of modernity." In this alternative idiom, modernity is understood as a singular phenomenon, though it is of course subject to continual contestation and reinterpretation. And much of this contestation involves challenges to Western models, programs, and institutional patterns. As Eisenstadt says, such challenges seek to deprive the West "of its monopoly on modernity."<sup>8</sup>

I will adopt this alternative language. I want to consider nationalism and politicized ethnicity as characteristically modern phenomena. As is evident to any student of comparative nationalism and ethnicity, these phenomena display no single patterns, but rather multiple configurations, patterns, and programs. Yet I want to treat nationalism and politicized ethnicity as manifestations of modernity as a singular historical phenomenon, though one that is dynamically changing and, of course, subject to chronic contestation.

### **Revisiting the critique of modernization theory**

The weaknesses of mid-century modernization theory's understanding of ethnicity, nationalism, and the nation-state have long come in for criticism. In the first place, modernization theory -- according to the familiar critique -- dismissed ethnicity as vestigial and therefore failed to theorize the persisting and indeed renewed significance of politicized ethnicity. Second, it was committed to an untenable form of the

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 24.

secularization thesis that confined religion to the private sphere; it therefore failed to theorize the continued and indeed renewed vitality of various forms of public religion. Third, modernization theory worked with a restricted understanding of modern forms of nationalism as axiomatically civic, secular, and inclusive and therefore failed to appreciate the persisting and indeed renewed significance of ethnic, religious, and exclusive forms of nationalism. Finally modernization theory overestimated the power of the modern state to elicit loyalty, instill solidarity, reshape subjectivities, and reframe social relations; it therefore failed to anticipate the continued and indeed renewed significance of sub-state or cross-state loyalties, solidarities, subjectivities, and social relations.

There is of course considerable truth to this critical characterization of certain forms of mid-century modernization theory. But the critique is exaggerated and overgeneralized in certain respects.<sup>9</sup> This can be seen by considering three figures whose important work on ethnicity and nationalism in the 1950s and early 1960s was powerfully influenced by modernization theory: Karl Deutsch, Ernest Gellner, and Clifford Geertz.

Deutsch's 1953 book *Nationalism and Social Communication* was among the first self-consciously social-scientific studies of nationalism, and it remains one of the most interesting, though it will certainly strike any contemporary reader as dated in many ways. For Deutsch, modernity meant social mobilization, as indicated by the growing share of the population that was residing in towns, working in non-agricultural occupations, exposed to the mass media, subject to military conscription, educated in

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<sup>9</sup> As others have noted, the critical reaction against modernization theory in general in the 1970s and 1980s was too sweeping, and tended to ignore the considerable sophistication of its leading proponents. See for example Alexander, "Modern, Anti, Post and Neo"; Alberto Martinelli, *Global Modernization: Rethinking the Project of Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

schools, and so on.<sup>10</sup> In Deutsch's account, this mobilized population posed a challenge to projects and processes of national integration. Deutsch had a deep personal familiarity with the complex and refractory nature of the "national question" in his native Bohemia and in central and eastern Europe as a whole; there was nothing complacent or teleological about his understanding of such projects of nation- and state-building. He was agnostic about whether such projects would succeed or fail, about whether they would lead to consolidated nation-statehood on the one hand or to dissimulation, nationalist conflict, and possible state breakup on the other.

Deutsch's book is certainly limited by its social-structural and quasi-demographic reductionism, and by its treatment of political and cultural struggles as epiphenomenal. But it is not guilty of the standard charges leveled against modernization theory. It remains significant as a pioneering effort to think about ways of mapping social processes, relations, and networks in a complex and dynamic manner. It served recently as a model for Neil Fligstein's study of the dynamics of social integration on a European scale.<sup>11</sup> And I believe the book would be richly suggestive -- strange though it might seem to say so -- to those interested in empirically studying contemporary transnational flows, networks, and processes.

Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism is best known from his 1983 book, but his argument was first worked out twenty years earlier.<sup>12</sup> Gellner was an unabashed if idiosyncratic exponent of modernization theory, and his theory of nationalism is at its

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<sup>10</sup> Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1953), p. 100

<sup>11</sup> Neil Fligstein, *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity, and the Future of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); "Nationalism," pp. 147-78 in *Thought and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974 [1964]).

core a theory of modernity. For Gellner, the primary generative fact of modernity was a complex, continuously changing division of labor, which generated a relatively fluid and mobile social order. This required -- and I leave aside here the well-known problems arising from Gellner's functionalist style of argument -- a new style of communication (what Gellner calls "context-free communication"); and it required a new kind of education: namely an extended, generic, state-provided "exo-education" that would teach literacy and impersonal communication skills in a standardized language and culture, rather than simply in a local dialect. The increased importance of routine communication with strangers in this new kind of social order put a new subjective and objective premium on culture and especially on language as a central marker of identity. And this in turn helps explain the intense politicization of language that was personally familiar to Gellner from his Central European background.<sup>13</sup>

As in Deutsch's work, there is little room for political struggles or cultural creativity in Gellner's account; he too can be charged with socio-economic reductionism. But Gellner does provide a powerful and parsimonious account of why culture matters to politics under modern conditions in a way that it did not matter before -- an account of the politicization of culture, or the culturalization of politics.<sup>14</sup>

Clifford Geertz may be the most interesting of the three for my purposes. He is not known today as a modernization theorist, or, for that matter, as a major theorist of nationalism or ethnicity. But he was closely associated with Talcott Parsons and modernization theory as a graduate student in Social Relations at Harvard, and his early

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<sup>13</sup> I note in passing the intriguing fact, which is surely no mere coincidence, that three of the major figures in the Anglophone literature on nationalism -- Hans Kohn as well as Deutsch and Gellner -- were from Prague

<sup>14</sup> It is true that "culture," for Gellner, primarily meant language; he gave much less attention to religion (despite his longstanding interest in the Muslim world).

work was in that tradition. This early work includes his major contribution to the analysis of ethnicity and nationalism, namely the long essay called "The integrative revolution" that appeared in the 1963 volume he edited, entitled *Old societies and new states*, with the characteristic subtitle: *The quest for modernity in Asia and Africa*.<sup>15</sup>

When this essay is cited today, it is usually in connection with discussions of "primordialism." Criticizing primordialist accounts of ethnicity from a constructivist or circumstantialist or instrumentalist point of view has been something of a minor industry in the last few decades. The problem with such critiques is not that they are wrong; it is that they are too obviously right to be interesting; and that they have no serious target. Such critiques often cite Geertz's essay as an example of a primordialist account. This is no doubt because he described the modernizing postcolonial state -- in his inimitable language -- as roiling the parapolitical vortex of primordial sentiments. For many readers today, this language may suggest a crude dichotomy between the rational, civil modernizing state and the "vortex" of irrational, traditional primordial attachments. But Geertz's analysis is far more interesting and subtle than this.

Geertz's account of politicized ethnicity was anything but primordialist. By "primordial attachments," he meant ties that are assumed (in vernacular understandings) to be natural, pre-political, and unalterable, or ties that are represented as such in vernacular discourse. He did not himself treat such ties as natural, pre-political, or unalterable. In fact his own analysis showed that such attachments were being rearticulated and aggregated in postcolonial states into larger, more diffuse ethnic blocs, aggregated along the lines of region, race, language, or religion, and stretched, as it were, to fit the scale of the state as a

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<sup>15</sup> Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution," in Clifford Geertz ed. *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

whole. The resulting structure of ethnic attachments, with its simplified and concentrated patterning of statewide group antagonisms, was in no sense the residue of "tradition." As Geertz emphasized, it was a product of modernity – a response to the structure and scale of political life in postcolonial polities.<sup>16</sup> So far from seeing ethnicity as primordial or vestigial, or as destined to be of merely private relevance in the modern polity, Geertz saw politicized ethnicity as intensifying precisely under modern political conditions.

Nor can Geertz be said to have drastically overestimated the power of the modern state to elicit loyalty, instill solidarity, and reshape identities. The "integrative revolution" to which his title alludes does not refer to "national integration" as envisioned by nationalist elites -- or by less sophisticated modernization theorists; it does not project an end-state of successful or complete "national integration." Geertz was even more sensitive than Deutsch to the complexities and difficulties besetting nation-building projects in postcolonial states. The "integrative revolution" refers to the momentous political transformation through which extraordinarily heterogeneous populations were brought together in a single ostensibly democratic and national state -- a state that styled itself as the state of and for the people over which it ruled. This new kind of state became much more significant than the preceding colonial state as a target, a prize, and an arena for action. Precisely this transformation is what elicited the reorganization of putatively primordial attachments that I have just mentioned and the intensification of politicized ethnicity. National integration as envisioned by postcolonial nationalist elites was largely a myth; but the "integrative revolution" described by Geertz was a fact.

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<sup>16</sup> Op. cit., p. 155.

## A "single modernity" perspective on ethnicity and nationalism

I now want to return to the question of multiple modernities. Willfried Spohn has recently made the case for analyzing contemporary forms of nationalism through the theoretical prism of multiple modernity. Spohn argues that a multiple modernities perspective is needed to make sense of the persisting though variable significance of religion and of what he calls "ethnic-primordial" elements as "constitutive dimensions of modern national identities and modern forms of nationalism." He then goes on to survey in comparative-civilizational perspective the differing configurations and trajectories of nationalism, religion, and secularization processes in differing world regions.<sup>17</sup>

Spohn's account is nuanced and insightful. But I am not persuaded that it requires the notion of multiple modernities. Spohn is certainly right that understandings and representations of national identities are intertwined with religion in differing ways in differing world regions. And the substantial comparativist literature that has developed in the last three decades has identified many other ways in which configurations and trajectories of nationalism, ethnicity, and race have varied over time and place. But I want to argue that this is entirely consistent with an understanding of modernity as a single historical phenomenon, though of course one that is internally complex and chronically contested.

I see two advantages of a "single modernity" perspective in the study of nationalism and ethnicity. First, such a perspective brings into focus the global nature of the processes -- socioeconomic, political, and cultural -- that have generated and

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<sup>17</sup> Willfried Spohn, "Multiple Modernity, Nationalism and Religion: A Global Perspective", *Current Sociology* 51 (2003): 265-286; the quotation is from p. 269.

sustained nationalism and politicized ethnicity as basic principles of vision and division of the social world, as fundamental ways of identifying self and other, and as elementary templates for making claims.

Socioeconomic processes include the social mobilization and changing division of labor described by Deutsch and Gellner. Political processes include the diffusion of a new kind of polity and a cluster of associated ideas that I will describe in a moment. Cultural processes include those I mentioned earlier in my discussion of Eisenstadt -- the development of a new reflexivity, an expanded understanding of autonomous human agency, and an enlarged sense of the possibilities of social change through political action. To emphasize the global nature of these processes is not to posit their uniformity: it is to underscore their scale, scope, and interconnectedness.

The second advantage of a "single modernity" perspective is that it highlights the diffusion of a set of organizational forms and political-cultural templates that provide the more immediate institutional and cultural materials for various forms of nationalism and politicized ethnicity. The notion of diffusion was central to mid-century modernization theory, and it has fallen into a certain disrepute. It is easy to criticize certain forms of modernization theory for their naïve and teleological understanding of the diffusion of a western model of a civic, secular nation-state. But this does not mean we should dispense with the notion of diffusion altogether. Diffusion does indeed occur, though what is diffused and how diffusion works need to be better specified.

The language of nationalism was from the beginning an internationally circulating discourse. This does not mean it was mechanically copied from one setting to another. As it was taken up in new settings, it was adapted to local circumstances and struggles,

translated into idioms with specific local resonances, and blended with various indigenous discursive traditions.<sup>18</sup> Still, the linked ideas, ideals, and organizational models of nation, state, citizenship, and popular sovereignty formed a kind of package. This package has a certain common core, underlying the varying adaptations, appropriations, and transformations. And one can speak of the global diffusion of this "package" in the two centuries following the French Revolution.

The package has an organizational and institutional component, and a cultural and ideological component. The organizational component includes the basic form of the bureaucratic territorial state. Of course there is a great range of variation in the form of contemporary states. But in longer-term historical perspective what is striking is the global diffusion of one broad type of polity -- the relatively centralized and intrusive territorial state, exercising direct rather than indirect rule, and governing through what Weber called legal authority with a bureaucratic administrative staff -- at the expense of many other types of polities. Also striking in longer-term perspective is the convergence -- across a wide range of variation in state size, efficacy, and regime type -- in domains of state activity: almost all contemporary states assume at least nominal responsibility for such matters as education, health, social welfare, dispute-resolution, the regulation of economic life, and so on.<sup>19</sup>

The cultural or ideological component includes the linked ideas of peoplehood, nationhood, and citizenship. Those over whom a state rules are understood not as subjects but -- at least potentially -- as active citizens. These citizens are understood to

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<sup>18</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 107.

<sup>19</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.*

comprise a coherent collectivity, a "people" or nation. This people or nation is understood as relatively homogeneous and as possessing a distinct unity, identity, or character. Finally, state authority is legitimated by some kind of reference to the sovereignty or "ownership" of "the people" or "the nation": the state is understood as the state of and for a particular "nation."

This language of peoplehood, nationhood, and citizenship is extremely flexible and adaptable. It can be used *by* states, but also *against* states. It can be used to legitimize a polity, but also to challenge its legitimacy, to demand a new polity, or to claim autonomy or resources within an existing polity. And the content of the idea of peoplehood or nationhood -- that which gives a people or nation its unity, its character, its particular and distinctive identity -- can be specified in various ways. It may be understood as shaped by the state and by shared political experience, or it may be understood as pre-political, existing prior to and independent of the state. It may be understood as grounded in citizenship, history, language, way of life, descent, race, or religion.

On this account, we do not need the notion of "multiple modernities" to make sense of ethnic or religious nationalisms; a single modernity perspective can make sense of them just as well. The question becomes not "how many modernities?" but how to characterize modernity *per se*. If we work with an outmoded, narrow, complacently Eurocentric account of modernity, then the notion of multiple modernity may be compelling. But if "modernity" is characterized in a more supple and sophisticated manner -- and there is a substantial literature that does just this -- then the case for a multiple modernities perspective is less compelling.

What does this mean in the domain of nationalism and ethnicity? If we work with an outmoded understanding of the modern nation-state and modern nationalism as purely secular and civic, with religion and ethnicity confined to the private realm, then a multiple modernities perspective may be compelling. But as I suggested above in reviewing the work of Deutsch, Gellner, and Geertz, this narrow understanding was by no means the only one available even in the 1960s, let alone today. A more supple understanding of political modernity has long been available in the literature. This understanding allows for the flexible adaptability and chronic contestation of internationally circulating models of state, nation, people, and citizenship,.

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To conclude: I have made two arguments for a "single modernity" perspective, one logical, the other sociological. The logical argument is this: In order to characterize multiple institutional patterns and cultural and political programs, even ostensibly anti-modern ones, as "modern," we need some criterion; and this criterion depends -- at least at an abstract conceptual level-- on a single notion of modernity.

The sociological argument is twofold: it emphasizes the globally interconnected socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes that have generated and sustained nationalism and politicized ethnicity as basic forms of cultural and political understanding, identification, and claims-making; and it emphasizes both the common core and the flexible adaptability of the package of ideas and organizational models of state, nation, people, and citizenship that has diffused worldwide in the last two centuries.