The West, Islam and Modernity

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"To what extent are West, Islam and Modernity, converging rather than monolithic notions?"

Introduction

The relationship between West and Islam is ever more relevant. The terrorist attacks in the US and Europe at the beginning of the new millennium, seemed to confirm the ideas expressed by Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama[1].

However critical engagement with such an issue, needs a deeper understanding of *West*, *Islam* and *Modernity,* avoiding essentialist definitions of single sets of well-defined and separated ideas. Islam, for instance, presents several differences within itself: the schism[2] between Sunnis[3] and Shiites[4], Sufi lodges[5], differences within Islam's branches themselves with at least three single Shiite streams and four different rival Sunni legal schools[6].

Without downplaying the importance of the *Islamic side* briefly aforementioned, this paper will focus more closely on the central term of the triad, modernity. This concept, developed in Europe and crafted around Europeans canons, afterwards adopted as yardsticks to define any other modernity[7], is the key to overcome a discussion centred on the approach of compatibility between West, Islam and modernity itself. Questioning the definition of these three terms as autarchic and distinctive notions, this essay will argue that modernity can be refrained *"in terms of partly competing and partly overlapping pattern of modernity"*[8]. Therefore, this paper will claim the existence of multiple modernities that, in an entangling process, contributes to their mutual creation and evolution.

In paragraph one I will illustrate the concept of modernity as originally defined in Eurocentric terms and how, notwithstanding its claim of universality, it presented multiple facets since its origins. In paragraph two, to rethink a notion of modernity that includes multiple modernities, I will introduce the theory of "cultural modernity". In paragraph three I will show the interaction between multiple modernities by the development of the concept of "entangled modernities". In paragraph four I will present the case of Turkey to show how Turkey's exceptionalism as the only Muslim democracy is to be based on multiple, entangled modernities, rather than compatibility between Western values and Islamic claims.

1. Is Western Modernity Unique and Universal?

To question the integrity and the universal validity of Western modernity, it is necessary first to emphasise its main characteristics. The sociological foundations of such claims are in the idea that modernity occurred in just one time and place, the West, because it presented the specific conditions for it to happen[9]. In particular cognitive and societal transformations: science, secularism, the belief in progress, the primacy of rationality, individualism[10].

Marx, Durkheim and Weber, all argue that the cultural program of European modernity, would prevail all over the world through the expansion of modernity itself[11]. The "*autocentric picture of itself as the expression of universal certainty*" has been defined as one major feature of modernity[12]. Consequently, the belief of modernity as a worldwide phenomenon introduced an "*imperial dimension*" into the narrative of modernisation[13], which reinforced

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the necessity for non-Western societies to adapt to the Western model.

However, the concept of modernity showed multiple understandings and definitions since its birth and later on through the continuing discussion around it. On a purely theoretical level two couples exemplify different understandings of the same ideas of modernity within the West itself, undermining the idea of integrity and autonomy of the concept itself.

The first one is represented by Charles Baudelaire's cultural/aesthetic modernity and Max Weber's societal/cultural modernity. Baudelaire, defining modernity as an overcoming process, exalted the present as the authentic newness, aestheticises it into the art of civil society and new forms of passion and heroism[14]. For Weber instead, modernity derives from a purely means/ends rationality, incapable to give a meaning to the world it shapes. Therefore the main outcomes will not be the Enlightenment rational utopia, but rather the iron cage of economic and bureaucratic control[15]. Thus follow two understandings of modernity: one in which culture is redeemed through the aesthetisation of the present and the other where culture is fragmented by societal modernization.

The second couple regards Jurgen Habermas and Michel Foucault. Habermas describes modernity as an incomplete process, in which the pessimistic Weberian outcomes can be avoided through a more sustainable balance of rationality, seen as an agency with different forms. Foucault instead sees modernity as unrecoverable. The power/knowledge network in which the rationality of the society is embedded, tends to reproduce the same social order that allowed it to raise[16].

On a more practical level, the first alternative modernities could be observed in the Americas. Here they emerged still within the Western civilizational framework, but in opposition and in a confrontation to the European process. The cornerstones of Western modernity, the nation-state and its institutions, were maintained; but the influence of non-Western societies lead to significant transformations of them[17].

Thus, it is impossible to refer to Western modernity as a unique and autonomous model. On the contrary, the presence of different understandings of modernity inside the West and the way in which they developed outside Europe, should lead us to consider an approach based on multiple modernities.

2. A-Cultural, Cultural and Multiple Modernity

Modernity has been described as early developed in the West as a set of transformations valid for every culture. These transformations did not reflect the social contexts that made them, but rather they were considered a culture-neutral, universal rational operation. Such idea leads to two misunderstandings of modernity. First, disguises peculiar aspects of Western modernities as universally workable; secondly, it narrows the focus only on those modernities that *respect* the Western canons. This set of ideas is what Charles Taylor defines A-Cultural Modernity[18].

In contrast to such theory, Taylor defines Cultural Modernity. The modernity that thinks *"of the differences as one between civilizations, each other with their own culture"*, where the term *culture* stands for a plurality of human cultures, languages and practices that define specific understandings of the social backgrounds[19]. Therefore such theory emphasises the idea of reflexivity, the empowerment of social actors into the process of perpetual social transformation of modernity through cultural self-reflection[20]. Consequently modernity is not a rational, cultural-neutral *locus* for all cultures to converge, but rather *"a movement from one constellation of background understandings to another"*[21].

This movement from different cultural programs stands at the core of multiple modernities. Such motion of multiple institutional and ideological patterns is carried by specific social actors against a peculiar social, political and intellectual background, holding different pathways towards modernity. Therefore the main outcomes are that modernity is no longer synonymous with the West[22]. Recognising a set of distinct ideological and institutional premises raised in Europe, the stress on reflexivity and on the agency of the self, gives the possibility to modify the starting form of modernity into several different forms of cultural modernities[23]. Globalisation accelerated this motion. The narrative of the self, characterising the globalisation era, introduces the politics of difference and multi-

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culturalism, bringing an intercultural understanding that outdates the Weberian means/ends rational modernity[24].

Finally, multiple modernities emerge not only between different societies, but rather within the same societies, giving different interpretations of modernity inside the same background. This trend of increasing diversification of understanding modernity based on different cultural agendas, underscores the tensions between varying conceptions of the self in West and East. Hence the ongoing exchange between unlike poles of understanding modernity, produces their original degree of influence on the globalising world[25].

3. Entangled Modernities

Previously it has been shown how multiple understandings of modernity hold a certain degree of influence over each others. Moreover it has been undescored by how the emergence of multiple modernities occurred through the appropriation and reinterpretation of Western modernity by non-Western societies. That indicates a clear connection and mutual relationship between the dissimilar cultural agendas of modernity.

Göran Therborn reinforces the approach to modernity as globalised rather than universal. He argues that globality allows us to focus more carefully on the variability of modernity, underlining the connectivity and interconnection as well as the continuity and discontinuity of such processes. In doing so he proposes the basis for the development of the theory of entangled modernities[26].

Therborne identifies two constitutive assumptions of such theory. First, the incomplete and infinite ruptures of modernity with the past; secondly, the geo-historical entanglements of socio-political backgrounds mutually influencing each others in reinterpreting modernity.

The former is composed by the major discursive narratives of modernity such as the European Enlightenment and its idea of emancipation from the past; the Kantian maturity, implying a progress from the ignorant past; the Social-Darwinism, leading to imperialism; the Post-Modernism, expressed by vital creativity of vanguardism. The latter develops varying modernity/anti-modernity relationships related to specific circumstances in different world areas. In Europe modernity occurred through internal strife; in the Americas modernity was thought in comparison and opposition to the European one; in the Colonial Zone it was first imposed and subsequently carried on by the natives; in other countries challenged and threatened by colonisation, called of Reactive Modernization, modernity was imposed by domestic élites[27].

Therborne recognises three different ways in which different modernities entangle each others. A spatial dimension, focused on *what* (people and/or institutions) is involved and *where* it happens; a processes level, centred on how entanglements are produced, whether by interactions, selective receptions, feedback, side-effects; an analysis of the effects, which may theoretically affect culture and/or society or practically enforce new pathways of modernity[28].

Finally, it seems correct to conclude that rather than a set of defined ideas derived from the West to which non-Western societies have to adapt to, modernity presents itself in different forms of hyphenated modernities.

1. 4. Theory in Practice: the Case of Turkey

Turkey has been often defined as the only Muslim Democracy, not only for its historical westward political orientation and Westernisation commitment, but also for its ability to overcome the Islamic obstacle to democracy adopting Western democracy in a non-Western society[29].

It has also been claimed that the nature of Turkish modernity is an exception. In fact in Turkey the forced coexistence of Western values and Islamic claims due to globalisation (universalisation of Western modernity), that usually leads to a clash, merged into compatibility that introduced an alternative modernity[30].

Both these perspectives clearly show how Islam is seen as incompatible with modernity, especially with the Western ideal of secular democratic nation-states[31]. Consequently many political Islamist issues have been downplayed, thus

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missing the importance of Islam in politics[32]. On the contrary, an approach that considers the role of Islam would better inquiry the uniqueness of Turkey multiple and entangled modernities.

To understand the Turkish way to secularism, *laiklik*, the European meanings must be abandoned. Turkey's cultural modernity is characterised by being at the same time Turk, Muslim and modern[33]. While European secularism means the separation between the state and religion, Turkish Kemalists did not exclude Islam from the state, but rather they defined it as a religion, controlled by the state. In this way they made Islam a constitutive outsider of the new state, reactivating it as a political discourse[34].

This paradox has been showing all his effectiveness through history. The transitional process to modernity, not relying on societal forces, did not activate a cultural modernisation, letting for defining Turkey as success in transition but a failure in consolidating democracy[35]. Therefore the real uniqueness of Turkey is explained by the path towards the reconciliation between secularism and Islamic heritage started in 2003. Together with the impossibility of affirming a Turkish identity denying its intertwining with Islam, the AKP took back in politics the more religious people, refusing the accusation of Islamic fundamentalism by invoking the Western tradition of conservative Christian-democratic parties[36].

Hence, the originality of Turkey's modernity stands not in the clash West/Islam, but rather in the "*complex interdependency between secularism and democratisation*" mirrored into the reflexivity of a Muslim society[37].

Conclusion

This paper has questioned the approach to West, Islam and Modernity as autonomous and distinct sets of notions. In particular is claimed that looking for a compatibility between Western Modernity and Islam might be a misleading stance, as there is no one archetypal and universal modernity to be adopted by every societies.

Focusing on the first element of the couple Western Modernity/Islam, it has been shown that it is impossible to define Western Modernity in only one way and accordingly for it be to a universal model. Rather different understandings exist of the same concept of modernity, inside and outside the West itself.

Once this evidence is accepted, instead of arguing for an alleged compatibility between the universal modernity (the Western) and all the others, it should be discussed how multiple modernities raise. To do that, it has been introduced the theory of Cultural Modernity, which represents the main theoretical assumption for the theory of Multiple Modernities.

Therefore, having illustrated that fixed canons of modernity do not exist, it has been suggested that multiple modernities are connected, and reflectively influenced by the ongoing reinterpretation of varying patterns of cultural agendas of modernity. A phenomenon embodied by the theory of Entangled Modernities.

Finally, Turkey has been taken to practically enforce the aforementioned theories. It has been argued that the real uniqueness of Turkey is its ongoing process of interpretation of modernity influenced by the different but indissoluble cultural patterns of Turkishness, Islam and West; not an allegedly unique abilities to adapt to presumed incompatible elements, a Muslim country and the Western democracy. In this way Turkey is constructing its own original modernity. One of many in a globalised world.

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