Modernities Revisited – Introduction

M. Behrensen, L. Lee, A. S. Tekelioglu

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"Modernity" is one of the master concepts of nineteenth and especially twentieth century thought and it has, impressively, entered the twenty-first century largely intact. It is telling of its forcefulness that the concept has survived – and, indeed, emerged hardly altered after – the heavy battering of blows dealt it by postcolonial and postmodern theories. Although no substantial reformulation has taken place, modernity has, however, been cast in newly relative terms. Its manifestation as a singular, uniform phenomenon has been replaced by a pluralized understanding in which there are as many modernities as there are experiences of it.

Thus, critiques have less overpowered modernity than they have led to an extension of its application; and yet we should not lose sight of the notable impact that this change has had. If "multiple modernities" theory is, in reality, just one argument concerning the ontology of modernity rather than a new consensus, still its emergence can be seen to amount to one of the biggest shifts in the theory of modernity in the history of that concept: whether one perceives modernity to be a multiple phenomenon or not, it is now beyond doubt that there are multiple *theories* concerning it. For Peter Berger, modernity is an assailant of sacred canopies, but we can now conceive of a period in which modernity was itself protected by a sacred canopy – and it is perhaps this canopy, rather than modernity itself, that has been altered and given rise to a new chapter in modernity theory.

This collection of essays – resulting from a conference of the same name – attempts to understand the two phases of modernity theory in light of one another – as collaborators rather than competitors. Rather than choosing between them – classical modernity or multiple modernities? – the collection explores three ways in which these two models can be combined. No attempt is made to present any coherent theoretical result of this exploration; rather, the collection capitalizes on the diversity of disciplines and interests that the IWM specializes in and supports. The methodology of the first section is conservative, involving a restitution of one of the cornerstone concepts of classical

modernity: the richly theorized public space, usually conceived of as democratic. The methodology of the second section is more radical, with papers exploring religion and secularism, so long considered to have very particular relationships with modernity but which today are seen as two of the greatest taken-for-granteds of classical modernity theory. The final section introduces a concept novel to classical modernity and derived from postcolonial and feminist critiques: embodiment. This section explores the diversity of ways in which the study of the modern can be expanded by appropriating theories which have been styled as aspects of rival conceptions – arguably unnecessarily.

This introduction introduces the essays gathered in the collection in relation to these themes and explores the lines of connection between contributors' particular accounts and the vast abstraction of modernities, revisited.

1. Revisiting the public space

Open and democratic public spaces are a foundational aspect of modernity. The concept and practice of these spaces was developed in the European Enlightenment and took on an increasingly fundamental role with the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century. In this section, we revisit the concept of public spaces from a postmodern perspective, that is, from a perspective that takes into account the violent effects of twentieth-century nationalism: world-wide wars, genocide, and mass migration.

In our first contribution, "Hannah Arendt, Agency, and the Public Space," **Andrea Thuma** re-examines Hannah Arendt's concepts of freedom and agency. Arguing that the complexity of the relationship between freedom and agency has not always received due attention, she shows that freedom, on Arendt's terms, is impossible without the creation of public spaces in which the individual can freely negotiate the terms of their coexistence with others. Thuma emphasizes that these public spaces have come under pressure in modernity, especially from political elites. Unless we choose to be politically active citizens, and unless we ensure that public spaces are available to everyone, this pressure may result in the denial of a public persona, and consequently in the denial of agency.

In the second paper, "Being European/Being Muslim," **Ahmet Selim Tekelioglu** examines contending perceptions of the Muslim presence in the "West" in relation to particular – and limited – conceptions of modern statehood. Tekelioglu's starting point is how International Relations has, as a discipline, neglected religious identities and religious politics. For IR, the modern state is a secular state. Tekelioglu argues that this view is simplistic at best, and that it actually prevents the discipline from getting a broader perspective on the political and social issues surrounding Muslim communities in Europe. Against this background, Tekelioglu claims that the notion of the public sphere needs to be revised in the face of the experience of "multiple modernities."

In the final contribution in this section, "Demographic Surgery in European History," **Antonio Ferrara** argues that ethnic cleansing is just one subcategory of what he terms "demographic surgery," i.e., the removal of entire segments of the population from a given territory. He shows that demographic surgery in the service of political repression and economic dispossession was often done along class rather than ethnic lines, as in, for

example, the Soviet "decossackization" and "dekulakization." To understand this, he says, we need to move away from narrow ideas of the nation: in the Soviet case, this history of demographic surgery is related not to a nation, but to a multi-national and secular state. Ferrara also shows how the societal effects of demographic surgery go beyond the mere "homogenization" of the national populace or the redrawing of national boundaries: demographic surgery has been a dangerously powerful tool of social engineering and political mobilization.

2. Secular modernity and religious modernities

Also foundational to the classical notion of modernity are the ideas of rationalization and secularization. Arguably, however, there has been no greater upheaval in our understanding of modernity in the last decade than in our understanding of the relationship between it and religion and nonreligion. Questions of how we understand the relationship between religiosity and modernity as well as how we can place different practices and perceptions of secularism in the context of modernity have presented themselves. There's now an established literature on how different practices of secularism across the world interact with modern social and political structures. In particular, an investigation of how different practices of secularism interact with modern social and political structures has become fundamental to different positions towards modernity: the modern, the postmodern, the postsecular and so on.

The papers presented in our conference not only showed the utility of a multiple modernities framework but also pointed towards the far reaches of this framework: religion, nonreligion and secularism do not merely take different colors across time and space; this multiplicity also describes the ways we approach these phenomenon from different perspectives and paradigms. The way we make use of methods and theories in various branches of social sciences – in this case, history, sociology and anthropology – helps us move away from traditional, linear interpretations of social and political change.

Beginning in post-Communist Romania, **Sorin Gog** explores how new religious movements challenge and interact with the post-Communist era's secularizing forces. Contrary to the widely held view that post-Communist regions have experienced a steady revival of religion, Gog argues that Romania's youth is extensively secularized. Utilizing an impressive fieldwork in which he worked with students attending secular and neo-Protestant educational institutions, he argues that post-Communist Romania is experiencing the secularizing forces of modernity but that this experience is entwined with counter-secularizing reactions. The implication is that a more nuanced picture should replace the simplistic notion of religious resurgence in both the public and private arenas of post-Communist nations.

Next, **Leo Schlöndorff** invites readers back in time and along an unbeaten track when it comes to secularization studies. He focuses on German apocalyptic literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, exploring these literary expressions of culturally contingent anxieties. His work, which focuses on how these secular apocalyptic visions

were communicated across the Atlantic, is an example of post-rationalist conceptions of the secular – a move towards the study of the secular in more substantive terms than classical modernity theory was apt to do.

Coming back to the contemporary era, **Leonardo Schiocchet** shares his impressive ethnographic study, conducted in Lebanese refugee camps with primarily religious identities: one Christian and one Muslim (Palestinian). These locations are in fact, he suggests, hubs for quite complex identity politics – points at which numerous cultural affiliations – including but not restricted to the overtly religious – overlap and intersect. Schiocchet's work unpacks these complicated strands, following them as they weave through various ritual practices, historical consciousnesses, personal narratives and other building blocks of daily lives. Contrasting so extremely from simple distinctions between religious cultures, the different interpretations and construction of personal and communal identities in the same spatial and temporal contexts across the camps indicate a need to move beyond presumed categories of culture, identity, time and space. Its particular contribution here is, arguably, to check any essentializing tendencies that might reappear as modernity negotiates postsecular arguments and new conceptions of how it can be seen to relate to the 'religious' and to the 'secular'.

Finally, **Lois Lee** turns the focus to contemporary Cambridge and London, presenting an ethnographic investigation of a less commonly identified culture: nonreligion. Highlighting a gap in existing literature, in which nonreligion and nonreligious diversity are notably absent from studies of the modernities in which they are most commonly present, Lee argues that we need to revisit existing understandings of the secular condition in modern Europe in this light. This empirical research contextualizes theories of how rationalism relates to religion and 'postsecular' perceptions of religion and religiosity, demonstrating a multiplicity of nonreligious mindsets which should force us to rethink classical notions of secularism – and enrich our understanding of multiculturalism with proper and important attention to faith/non-faith dialogue.

3. Embodying modernity/ies

Postmodern and feminist critiques, as well as contributions from media and cultural studies, have demonstrated the thinness of previous, intellectualist conceptions of modernity and shown ways in which the body and experiences of embodiment should be accounted for. Urbanization – with its emphasis on the physical features of society and, indeed, an explicit discussion of the body if only in terms of its location in space – is one of a few examples from classical theory in which modernity is seen to be inscribed in or on material structures. In general, however, the physical aspects of the politics and belongings described in the earlier sections have been marginal concerns and remain outside of the mainstream.

Continuing in its ambition to combine insights from classical theories of modernity with insights from critiques of that theory, this section on embodiment and materiality shows some of the ways that bodies and other physical forms have been and continue to be involved in histories of modernity. Opening this section, **Maren Behrensen**'s paper –

“Intersex and sports: The end of gender segregation?” – deals with taken-for-granted norms of embodiment, illustrating some of the subtle ways in which non-democratic ideals are inscribed in modern societies and bodies. The paper deals, theoretically and politically, with the issue of intersex sportspersonhood, and how and why societies have regulated this. Behrensen makes a powerful argument for de-regulation, demonstrating how the regulation of intersex conditions is unwarranted, neither philosophically, ethically nor competitively. Although the issue is not confined to it, these issues present particular challenges for the democratic and meritocratic rationales which have been central to modernity. Behrensen’s contribution provides a powerful check to naïve progress narratives of modernity, showing how entrenched certain norms – and especially, perhaps, sex- and gender-related norms – are in contemporary society.

Grzegorz Krzywiec’s paper – “Polish anti-Semitism: The last European closet, cultural code, or social problem?” – comes from a very different perspective: it questions – and shows the problems of assuming – any direct relationship between human bodies and ideologies. Taking up the ideas of Paul Lendvai, Krzywiec suggests that the persistence of “anti-Semitism without Jews” – and even “anti-Semitism without anti-Semites” – should be a core question for researchers in this area. In fact, his paper shows that ideologies can abstract “bodies” from their physical reality – such that Polish anti-Semitism has become a cultural threat again regardless of the (relative) physical absence of the Jews (Polish and otherwise) in Poland. Thus, Krzywiec contribution rejects the necessary materiality of embodiment, emphasizing instead the body’s *metaphorical* power in ideology. On the other hand, in this analysis, the embodiment of *values* has the most significant impact on how societies take form; embodiment is, his paper suggests, a way of making values tangible – and useful as a resource in ongoing competition over Poland’s collective memory. Kryzwiec’s emphasis on embodiment as metaphor for ideologues is followed by a Katharina Steidl’s study which takes precisely the opposite tack. Her research into photogram technology and its impact upon the conception of modernity – and at one of the crucial moments of its development, at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century – shows how constrained this conception has been by the materiality of its technologies. “Traces of/by nature: August Stringberg’s photographic experiments of the 1890s” gives a fascinating portrait of photography’s main rival technology, the photogram, and the philosophical, scientific and quasi-scientific debates that related to both the understanding and misunderstanding of that technology. In particular, she points to the perception of the photogram as a uniquely realistic and autonomous recorder of nature – as a technology that apparently made this record without human intervention – and the impact this had on contemporaneous conceptions of authenticity and objectivity. The historical study shows how the material object can profoundly shape the thinking subject and, in this case, shows how European modernity – which has been considered almost an ideal-typical form – is contingent on its own, very particular cultural – and *material* – context(s).

Elitza Stanoeva’s closing contribution brings together many issues raised in the preceding three contributions. Her study, “The dead body of the leader as an organizing principle of socialist public space: The mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia”, is an examination of Communist leader cults in which the distinction between human

embodiment and inanimate materiality becomes blurred. Focusing on the mummification and monumentalization of Dimitrov in Bulgaria but also Lenin in Russia, Stanoeva compares the once live object of the leader's body with exhibits in national museums, arguing that the mausoleum functions in some similar but also many distinct ways. There is a difference, she argues, between embodiments of the attributes of power and embodiments of the persons of power. Even without life, there is an ontological distinction between the dead human body and other inanimate objects which enables a degree of empathy that, as she puts it, "requires neither specialized knowledge nor special mediators". Thus, Stanoeva moves us away from a tempting essentialistic view of what embodiment can bring to modernity studies.

And the possibility of life after death is an appropriate end-point for a collection interested in playing with and possibly transcending the conceptual boundaries between the apparently incompatible: the singular modern and the multiple modern.

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