Some Reflections on "Tangible Elements of Multiple Modernities"

DENIZ KANDIYOTI

One of the noteworthy features of the dialogues and conversations that took place during our deliberations on "multiple modernities" was the creative tension between the contributions of those of us involved with designing and understanding the built environment and the social scientists concerned with analysing the concept of modernity and its application within diverse societal contexts. While the former were alert to the "modern" as a genre, and the contemporary effects of the global circuits of capital on the circulation of tastes and styles, the latter grappled with issues of difference and disjuncture between the West and Islam, between the notion of a singular modernity as opposed to plural modernities.

The best points of entry for a discussion of the "tangible" elements of modernity were provided by deceptively simple observations concerning the changing use of space. For instance, the preference of Iranian families for open plan kitchens that eliminate the separation between women's cooking quarters and include them in the social space where television is watched and members of the family interact. Or the fact that this preference is not confined to affluent Tehranis but also exists among those villagers in Bam rebuilding their homes devastated by the earthquake. I suggest that these observations provide us with lines of inquiry as valuable as pondering the modernity of Khomeini's theory of rule or the novelty of *Velayat-e faqih*. To elaborate on this idea, however, I must first draw attention to some conceptual distinctions between the terms "modernisation" and "modernity" which were invoked repeatedly throughout our discussions.

The first sense of modernisation, ushered in through the work of early masters of social theory such as Marx, Weber, Tonnies and Durkheim, invoked the notion of a fundamental break with a historical past recast as "tradition". This process of change was multidimensional and exhaustive, comprehensively transforming societies from demographic patterns to belief systems. After World War II, these insights were translated into so-called "modernisation theory", which widely acknowledged as a product of the Cold War. This theory presents social change as a uni-linear, teleological, process that inevitably leads to liberal capitalism, any deviations being interpreted as "transitional" or "pathological". Soviet theorists had a counterpart in the Marxist-Leninist sequence of the stages of socio-economic formations. It was not too long before "convergence" theorists argued that modern societies had a common "core" regardless of their political systems: faith in science and technology, similar technologies of production, bureaucratic modes of governance, mass societies, etc.

Another approach treats "modernity" as a condition or an ideological trope that represents the realisation of the Enlightenment project of progress and emancipation. This sense of modernity is specifically related to the historical trajectory of the West. Critiques of modernity have abounded - from Foucault's analyses of the underside of modern institutions, to the colonial, racist and sexist discourses implicit in narratives of progress and emancipation. These critiques have turned categories such as "backwardness" on their head and reframed "tradition" as resistance, nowhere more so than in the encounters of Western colonials in Muslim lands. This has inadvertently opened the way to a reification of culture and romantic populisms that glorify national "authenticity" defined in opposition to the West. The debate as to whether these diverse forms of social/political expression constitute "alternatives to modernity" or "alternative modernities" rages on, but these discussions have almost always been reliant on an implicit notion of internally homogenous cultures, or civilisations, confronting one another, an assumption which for many has, sadly, turned into conventional wisdom.

If we are to find our way back to an appreciation of the popularity of open plan kitchens in Iran, we must first jettison this theoretical baggage and achieve a workable understanding of the processes of social change that are shaping social relations today. We must be able to understand that the Iranian state is not only as an Islamic state but a modern revolutionary state that, like all revolutionary states, relies on the mass mobilisation of its citizenry, including women. We must be able to reflect on the internal contradictions created by a youthful, now extensively literate and mobile, population with heightened expectations for betterment and self-expression and a regime that utilises fairly crude instruments of policing and social control. It is quite clear that these instruments have been inadequate, giving rise to reformist longings and feminist contestations. It is not so much a case of modernity being or not being compatible with Islamic rule but a case of societal change inevitably forcing and testing the boundaries of what is acceptable under such rule – a challenge that is of a totally *political* nature regardless of the culturalist arguments deployed about the evils of the West and the assumed authenticity of Islam.[1]

This discussion is not intended to deny the existence of a powerful and hegemonic model emanating from the capitalist West. This is in evidence, sometimes quite forcefully, in the economic and governance packages imposed by institutions of global governance, especially in the context of armed interventions. However, since our focus is on modernity we must necessarily complicate this picture. Appadurai's observations that "modernity is decisively at large, irregularly self-conscious and unevenly experienced"[2] and that modernity surely involves a general break with all sorts of pasts are quite productive. He proposes that migration and the media are two features of globalisation that are constitutive features of modern subjectivity and collective imaginaries.

---

[1]   Notice how Islamic fundamentalists and crusading imperialists are totally reliant on one another's demonologies, all one has to do is invert their terms.
[2]   Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

The local phenomena thrown up by these negotiations between diverse pasts, a globalised present and contested futures are, by necessity, dizzyingly complex. Yet placing all the diverse manifestations of emergent public spheres, social movements, and civil societies under the rubric of "modernity" does not absolve us from the task of recognising the implicit ethical choices and *politics*. Referring to "multiple modernities" should not give us an out in that respect. We must live with the uncomfortable knowledge of the existence of Evangelical Christians willing to blow up abortion clinics in California, fundamentalist Jews treating the Bible as a title deed to Palestine, Indian Hindus calling for religious unity under the saffron flag, with their Muslim co-citizens cast as aliens, and Muslims calling for the slaughter of infidels under the guise of *jihad*. Are these modern movements? Undoubtedly so. They are also both transnational and diasporic. We must be mindful not to allow some crucial differences in worldview, which incidentally cut across East and West and a multiplicity of faiths, to be occluded by our search for multiple modernities.