Commentary: A realist view of modernity and capitalism
Rethinking modernity and capitalism: Add context and stir
by Jan Nederveen Pieterse

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Modernity, rationality and capitalism: how useful are these concepts in understanding the twenty-first century global scene? Not much, according to Jan Nederveen Pieterse (hereafter JNP). The main thesis of JNP elucidated in ‘Rethinking modernity and capitalism: Add context and stir’ is sound, alluring and easy to agree with. However, upon closer reflection some problems emerge. A solid thesis that invites disagreements is a recipe for a robust debate with huge potential for clarifying thoughts and improving our understanding of the global situation. It would be almost impossible to find a social scientist worth her or his salt who did not wrestle with the universalism–particularism problem. That’s why the debate is seemingly interminable. But here JNP does not simply rehash the old debate. He presents a more nuanced puzzle grounded in a careful exegesis of social thought and macroscopic social scientific theories since the birth of modernity and social sciences in the West circa the eighteenth century. He provides a sociology of knowledge account of the macro theories of sociology from its classical inheritance. His table of theories is a useful summary of complex theoretical frameworks.

The thesis of JNP as I understand is this: the world shows various tendencies of decentring, and multipolarities, yet much of the thinking and talks are in essence grounded in universalism. Even the critique of West-centred universalism and even Western domination cannot escape from the moorings of the universalist discourse as the protagonists pose ‘the East’ or China as alternative to and a contender for the same universalist worldview.

Categories such as capitalism, modernity and rationality are accepted as dominant paradigms around which various friendly or critical debates revolve. So even as one debates the Western hegemony – and such voices are frequently being heard – one offers a new non-Western hegemony falling into the same trap of universalist thought categories. JNP’s diagnosis is on the spot, no doubt.

This point is best illustrated in the discussion of the rise (or re-rise) of China as a dominant and – in many estimates – the number one economic power (in the sheer size of its GDP in the not-too-distant future). China since the death of Mao Zedong and communism has embarked on a capitalist development and since 1991 with the joining of the World Trade Organization has pursued a neoliberal capitalist trajectory. Such interpretation, for JNP, is ahistorical and grounded in the dominant interpretative discourse of the current Western social science, where few big paradigms (capitalism, modernity and rationality) dominate the discussions. JNP’s discussion of what is going on in China’s economic development is refreshing and deep. His rich discussion of China’s developments brings his point home. In some interpretation, what is happening in China is not a blind imitation of the Western model of market capitalism. There are several types of capitalism at play even within China and within the broad state–economy relationship at different levels of the state structure.
In the very opening sentence JNP claims: ‘we have entered an era of multipolarity’. The proposition of multipolarity itself needs to be analysed, not averred. However, the alleged ‘multipolarity’ is compromised by the hegemony of the American standards in various financial sectors.

The talk of polarities does not seem very relevant in the post-bipolar world, which was rooted in the Cold War. In some sense, the idea of multipolarity is the coinage of the Cold Warriors. And yes, the bipolarity seemingly ended with the collapse of the ‘really existing’ socialism in the early 1990s. In light of the recent developments in Ukraine (as of August 2014) and international diplomacy, there is a likelihood of a return of bipolarity and a new ‘Cold War’. The new world of the twenty-first century is decertified primarily as the dominance of the US declines as an economic powerhouse. It may be possible to argue that decertening and multipolarity may not be the same thing. China is poised to be the largest economy in the world, yet for the time being it will also be classified as a Middle Income country as far as the World Bank classification is concerned. India is now the third largest economy of the world, surpassing Japan, but is fated to remain a least developed country for the time to come. The US, despite its declining position in the world league table as an economic power, will remain the largest military power, the centre for intellectual excellence, and a strong economic power. The US remains and is likely to remain the knowledge and innovation capital for a long time. Building the world’s tallest building is a lot easier than building the world’s best universities; and building the fastest railway is easier than creating a culture of scientific creativity. The land of Hollywood, the capital of world popular culture, will continue to be the leading light of the world, weaving new ideas and crafting new technology. An innovation hub, the US will remain a source of new ideas. And if and when the world turns to be a knowledge economy in a substantive sense beyond the rhetoric, the US may regain its dominant position on the global map. Dislodging America as an economic superpower does not take away the Rocky Mountains, or Spielbergs, the creators of The Simpsons, or the New York City Public Library.

**Convergence or divergence?**

To the question of whether convergence or divergence, variance or invariance, is the result of the global development, a simple – yet, not simple-minded – answer is: both. In fact, convergence and divergence seem to characterize the world today at the same time. This is not just a clever play of the words. Capitalism will remain the dominant mode of production in the years to come. Capitalism will have staying power because at heart human beings prefer freedom to bondage. Although it is often the idea of freedom and not the substance of it, the idea of freedom remains alluring. Bondage, whether economic, or political, or cultural, is unappealing to many, yet a large number of people in a swathe of land remain in bondage of various forms. The paradox of the really existing world today is that in order to ensure the freedom that capitalism offers, some sections of the society remain unfree. Similar logic holds with regard to the invariance of capitalism coinciding with the variance of political and cultural systems.

Samuel Huntington draws upon Rainer Baum in support of his position of clash of civilizations. Huntington says:

Reviewing at length the available evidence concerning ‘the invariance hypothesis’, Rainer Baum concludes that ‘the continuing quest of man’s [sic] search for meaningful authority and meaningful personal autonomy occurs in culturally distinct fashions. In these matters there is no convergence toward a cross-culturally homogenizing world. Instead, there seems to be invariance in the pattern that were developed in distinct forms during the historical and early modern stages of development’. (Huntington, 1996: 76)

All cultures today borrow selectively aspects of other cultural products and in certain areas we do see a near convergence, especially in the area of information technology. A mobile phone is the new symbol of convergence. Yet, it would be a useful reminder via Braudel, who Huntington quotes approvingly, ‘that it would almost “be childish” to think that modernization or the “triumph of civilization in the singular” would lead to the end of the plurality of historic cultures embodied for centuries in the world’s great civilizations. Modernization, instead, strengthens those cultures and reduces the relative power of the West.” Huntington, adds: ‘In fundamental ways, the world is becoming more modern and less Western’ (Huntington, 1996: 78).

The dominance of American standards is understandable. At one level it is hegemonic, at another a common standard is – or a minimum set of standards – only a matter of convenience, and when we accept differences, it is important to ensure that they are convertible. Take the example of currency, in most of Europe life for a tourist has become more convenient with the implementation of the Euro, a common currency. Globally, the US dollar remains the most convertible and serviceable currency. The recent conversation on using a non-dollar currency in intra-BRIC trade is a new development and it
might dent the financial architecture of the world.

The convergence thesis as represented in the classical sociological theories was a legacy of the Enlightenment project. With hindsight and in light of the conflicts and contentions of the world we live in today, we can criticize their naïveté. The macro-historical social scientists today, whether it is Immanuel Wallerstein in his World Systems theory or Sanjay Subramania in his 'connected history' perspective, are not mimicking the old masters but drawing inspiration from them and embellishing and modifying the insights of the classical theories as per the demands imposed by the changing empirical reality. This is how social scientific knowledge transforms. The Thomas Khun model of paradigmatic revolution may explain the changes in theoretical frames of the natural sciences, but changes in the theories of social sciences follow a different path. The continuity argument can be best illustrated by the fact that in any social science programme a student has to learn the developments of sociology or social sciences, whereas it is highly unlikely that students in the physics programme will read about the history of physics. Philosophers of science have made this argument time and again.

**Nomothetic versus ideographic?**

The concept of plurality in itself has to be a unitary (or nomological) concept or else the idea will melt into multiple meanings. Writers who propound the notion of a 'multiple' modernity thesis need to have agreement on the meaning of concept of 'multiple' as well as 'modernity'. Or else, the discussion will stall. In order to understand the multipolarity thesis we cannot pursue ideographic and multiple notions of multipolarity. At least, as a starting point, we need a common understanding of plurality, multiplicity and so on. In fact, in order to get a discussion going we need some agreement on the meaning of the concepts we use, a minimum set of conceptual catalogues or repertoire is needed in order to have a debate over multipolarity, multiplicity, variance, etc.

We use concepts to make sense of the reality. Yes, the starting point is an agreement that there is a social reality out there unless we are incorrec ‘mentalists’ or super-idealists. If we start with the premise, as many sadhus of the yore did, that everything is maya, an illusion, we would use our time more productively by meditating under a tree than to pursue social science. Now whether one calls this position a ‘realist’ or ‘dialectically realist’ position does not matter, but without such a premise we will stall before we start.

Now why should we assume that to capture or understand a micro, centred or a fragmented reality, we need a centred theoretical framework? Our sciences or scientific tools need not be the mirror opposites of the realities we try to comprehend. In order to measure a mega earthquake, we use a small tool and to ‘see’ the behaviour of an invisible (to the naked eye) particle, we use a super collider. In social sciences, sometimes by using a macro-perspective, we can capture the micro-changes in institutions leading to macroscopic consequences. Besides, macro and micro are only heuristic devices, analytical divisions we make for reasons of convenience.

Arguing that the difference between nomothetic and ideographic are not polar opposites; instead, a social scientist can cherish nomothetic ambition while pursuing an ideographic case. In understanding a particular case of social movement or revolution we can employ theories of social movement or revolutions, which were developed based on empirical evidence of social movements or revolutions at different places and times, but we cannot remain blind to the empirical realities that may be different and may require us to modify or add to the repertoire of existing theories of social revolutions. Our understanding of social reality is situated but not determined. Our views change, some ideas become dominant or decline in a complex entanglement with changing social realities.

Social scientists continue to employ concepts such as modernity, capitalism, rationality and democracy as guides or templates to understand social realities, which are a mix of invariant and changing institutions, values, debates and discourses. Some concepts are less controversial than others. Braudel made an important point that “The word capitalism [highlighted in the original] can only be kept under control, defined, and used in historical exploration by situating it carefully between the two underlying words that give it its meaning: capital and capitalist” (Braudel, 1977: 47). Both capital and capitalist are tangible realities, while capitalism remains intangible and abstract but by no means inconsequential.

**Is universalism hegemonic?**

‘Universalism belongs to the era of hegemony’ (JNP, p. 12). Does it? It may be argued, that if universal ideologies or categories of thought were allies of hegemonic power, to resist the hegemonic power, one needs an equally or more powerful universalistic idea. Colonialism was defeated by the idea of freedom, a highly universalistic idea. The idea of self-determination, a core principle of twentieth-century nationalism, bred in an aspiring hegemonic power,
became a universal position. The idea of resistance is not local, though there may be local variations of this universal idea. JNP’s view of universalism is perhaps narrower than the one espoused here.

In order to understand decentring and fragmentation one has to have a view of the centre. It can be argued that the hegemonic powers may have a stake in seeing or help creating a decentred world. A global capitalist empire will thrive in a decentred, fragmented world. Whether we want to ‘smash, tame or erode capitalism’ (Erik Olin Wright’s phrase), we need a universal understanding of capitalism, not decentred, multiple views of the beast. For the beast, that is, the untamed capitalist system is more like an octopus; rather than maiming a tentacle it is imperative to go after it as a totality.

References


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