Summary: Eisenstadt, Multiple Modernities

EISENSTADT argues that the classical view on modernity, as derived from the Western experience, is not applicable to all modernizing societies, and that it needs to be substantiated by a notion of multiplicity. This is for the reason that modernizing societies bring in their own socio-cultural influences that drive modernization, and that the Western experience may merely serve as a reference point in the respective developments. The modernization process, as he continues, needs to be understood as the negotiation of multiple societal stakeholders about what makes society modern rather than as a historical consequence.

As the notion of multiplicity raises the question about what in essence constitutes modernity, EISENSTADT refers to WEBER for the precondition, that modernity is initiated by the emancipation from traditional concepts of authority which empowers members of society to an ongoing contestation of the status quo. On the individual level, modernity goes along with the awareness of being part of a wider societal scheme than the immediate community, and a feeling of autonomy as well as entitlement in shaping society.

For the political realm EISENSTADT derives that the notion of autonomy opens the stage for opposition as a legitimate driver of the political process. As a consequence of the broad acceptance of participation, the adoption of fringe positions leads to a strengthening of the political center, and the mutual influence between center and periphery perpetuates the overall weight of active participation and autonomy. Thus, the appropriation of fringe positions by the center fuels the necessity for the opposition to shape out more distinctly for the reason of differentiation and as a justification for its existence when the center-periphery boundaries are increasingly blurring. Derived from this notion, modernity develops an inherent potential for continual self-correction.

With an opportunity for potential gains from negotiation within this process, multiple societal segments have an incentive to claim their stakes in an overall politicization of society. These conditions allow for two major collective ontologies, the notion that human agency should be directed to fulfill an exclusive societal vision with totalistic claims and the complementary notion of inclusive and relativistic pluralism rooted in the ideas of Enlightenment. While both of these strands are directed to create overarching meaning and autonomy for the individual in its relation to society, the first can further be differentiated by its means of justification, that is, in terms of the primacy of the collectivity with respective attributes and a civil component directed towards societal progress. On this bases, a variety of “archetypical” modern ideologies competed within the entity of the nation-state for predominance of the political system, though beginning to be part of an international scheme.

With respect to multiplicity, as EISENSTADT continues, the extent of antagonism between modern ontologies and the homogeneity of their movements already differed significantly among the first modernizing societies. Building on the earlier experience of modernization, with its inherent problems and deficiencies, there developed the first alternative interpretations that aimed at the reconfiguration of the very core of society by appropriating the idea of modernization. As these movements, namely Soviet communism and national-socialism, exploited the idea of modernization to their own ends, it has to be noted that the idea of self-correction developed a radical dimensions as it included means such as the ideological justification for atrocities. While socio-economic patterns became increasingly global also the concept of modernity began to defuse. Whereas modern
institutions and themes were accepted to serve their purpose in a non-Western context, the traditional modern concept with its weaknesses and threats for the identity of society served as an important factor to distinguish reinterpretations of modernity from the West and was employed for the development of new collective identities. Thus, with individual cultural preconditions, to different extents, and with different timings.

At the same time, the intensification of globalization began to increasingly detach the concept of modernity from the entity of the nation-state that increasingly forfeit control over hitherto internal affairs which allows for transnational visions of collective identities that contested modernity on the ground of the nation-state. Rooted in social transformations of the global context, these new modern movements are, as EISENSTADT notes, based on socio-philosophical, religious, or ethnic identities and are negotiating their particular stakes within the modern institutional arenas. While competing with the existing interpretations of modernity and amongst each other, they also show, though to different extents, many of the aforementioned patterns of modernization within themselves. Without aiming at the core of society, new social movements are continually dissociating the concept of modernity from the West.

In sum, EISENSTADT argues that modernity in its multiple dimensions is a continual mechanism of reappropriations and reinterpretations of the idea of modernity. Driven by individual socio-cultural influences brought about by globalization, emerging versions of modernity negotiate and create their spaces within a modern institutional framework. Given the dynamics of a continual diversification of multiple modernities, EISENSTADT concludes that neither of the Western-centric assumption of the “end of history” or the “clash of civilizations” hold true by the change of the century.