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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Modernity as the Last of the Grand Narratives: From the Social Philosophies of Crisis to the Crisis of Social Philosophies

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ABSTRACT

Social philosophies are important civilizational claims especially in times of crisis. There had been many social philosophies from various civilizations until the European colonialist domination. Modernity was constructed as the ultimate paradigm for humanity during the destruction of other civilizations and social philosophies during the colonialist expansion of the European powers. This paper claimed that Eurocentric modernity built itself as the last meta-narrative with the help of colonialist mentality and practice and imposed itself all over the world. Efforts to show the global difference between the West and the rest among social theorists helped to build a global other for Europeans. It also destroyed the opportunity to search for alternatives with the death of grand narratives because of the very failure of modernity itself. Today, Islamic civilization remains to be a potential challenging paradigm as it produced theories of the like S. Qutb and A. Shariati.

Keywords
modernity • *colonialism* • *social philosophies* • *crisis* • *meta-narrative*

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Many scholars and philosophers have attempted to explain the origins of human civilizations, human nature, and the formation of societal institutions, with a vision to project the future of their respective societies or civilizations throughout world history. These philosophies of history or civilization have strong relations with the grand theories or metanarratives about humanity. Every society that made civilizational claims in world politics produced a theoretical narrative about the origins of the earth, the human species, the formation of societies, and the political system. The Chinese, ancient Egyptians, ancient Greeks, nomadic Turks, Muslims, Jews, and many other societies developed social philosophies, expressed in written or oral forms, that explained the origins of history and their role in it. These kinds of texts – written or oral – sometimes formed the backbone of the foundation of respective civilizations as in foundational myths. Sometimes they were produced in times of crises in order to resolve the problems that those civilizations had faced, e.g., destructive calamities like pandemics, earthquakes, or foreign invasions. Pitirim Sorokin dealt with such "social philosophies" in his book. He compared several Western scholars who wrote on the subject, along with his own.

These grand narratives or theories had particular readings of history, human nature, and socio-political systems. The axioms of these philosophies about human nature and origins of societal formations were mostly based upon the assumptions inferred from historical records in some, common sense based on analytical thinking in others, and religion and transcendental sources in many. For example, Karl Marx – and many others – based their reading of history on common assumptions about the origins of humanity with a materialist outlook. The basic assumption of his theory is the evolution of the human production process and societal formation from the simplest to the complicated, while the dialectic of the two classes fundamentally remains the same. His materialist understanding of human history and development was not new. More than four centuries ago, a Muslim philosopher, Ibn Khaldun, developed a similar materialist view about the beginning of history. Humans needed some skills in order to survive in nature. They developed tools and social organizations for their survival (Khaldun, 2004). The societal formations brought some differentiations and clashes between competing classes or tribes.

Materialist and Idealist Theories

Although there are considerable differences between Marx's and Ibn Khaldun's social theories and their references (the former's reference is to the nature while the latter's to God), they are also surprisingly similar. This similarity comes from their materialist understanding of the beginning of civilizations. Here, materialism/ist refers not to the narrow Marxist one but to a general term focusing on the tangible and physical development of human civilization. For Marx, the materialist view is the ultimate reading of history and future, and it is also a dialectical one, while for Ibn Khaldun, the first societal

formations and civilizations came out of material needs, but subsequent developments would and should include non-material domains such as language, sciences, and arts as well. Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan is another example of a materialist and realist reading of human nature and socio-political origins, which rejected the traditional understanding of summum bonum of human nature and focused on summum malum, just like Ibn Khaldun. Ibn Khaldun underlined the necessity of a strong political leadership because of the animalistic nature of man and further to secure the complicated civilizational progress, while Hobbes was interested in restricting man's evil capabilities (Khaldun, 2004). The difference is that Ibn Khaldun saw that the earliest societal organizations, like tribes and other political entities, came out of this because man also has the capability to think that this is for his own good. In Hobbes, such an understanding of transferring power to one authority among people should come out. In other words, Ibn Khaldun wrote in a positive way and Hobbes wrote in a normative way, a point which will be touched on briefly.

Materialist readings of human civilizational history are not the sole way of looking at the matter. Hegel was almost epitomized for the idealistic version of understanding humanity. For him, the history of man is the history of thought. Humans lost the unity of thought at the beginning of history, and the whole existence on earth is focused on the reconciliation with dualisms and alienations that they have been caught since then, which could only be reconciled with a shared morality based on rationality (Yar, 2025). Needless to say, all these scholars and philosophers are influenced by the Greek philosophers, mainly Plato and Aristotle, one way or another, including Ibn Khaldun.

Some of these narratives are normative (telling what ought to be), some of them are positive (telling what it is), and some of them are both. The treatise of Ibn Taymiyya or al-Madina al-Fadila of al-Farabi can be considered normative as they suggested methods and practices about how a (Islamic) community and ruler should be. Ibn Khaldun's and Marx's accounts can be considered positive as they analyzed the historical facts as they are and suggested/predicted similar patterns in the future.

In most of the accounts, there has been an eternal conflict or competition between two or more classes. In Ibn Khaldun, the core conflict is between the hadarah (sedentary culture) and the badawah (nomadic culture) (Khaldun, 2004). In Ibn Taymiyya, the conflict is between friends of Allah and friends of Shaytan (Taymiyyah, 2000). In contemporary Muslim scholars like Ali Shariati and Sayyid Qutb, the eternal conflict is between the worldviews of Tawhid and Shirk and between Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah, respectively (Şeriati, 1980; Kutub, 1980). All these authors also wrote during times of crisis. They tried to answer the problems of their societies and external threats like enemy invasion or catastrophes.

Early Modernity and Origins of the Paradigm

Christian civilization was confined to the European continent despite its origins and considerable population in the Middle East after the Islamic and Turkish conquests. Despite efforts like the Crusades, Muslim domination of the Old World became evident in the fifteenth century. Moreover, catastrophes like the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century destroyed almost one-third of the European population. Responding to such a deep crisis resulted in the invasion of Americas and the questioning of the existing religio-political order. Reform and counter-Reform debates confluenced with the encounter with the native Americans. It seems to be a crucial point in the history of modernity because it was the time when European thinkers and reformers were consolidating against an invincible enemy (Muslim) who was to be demonized and meeting with a relatively powerless other (native American civilizations). Consolidation against the arch enemy was thanks to the efforts of reformer Martin Luther and became a decisive character of the subsequent mental structure of Western philosophers for centuries (Ahmad, 2017). On the other hand, the sixteenth century had been busy with the question of how to deal with natives in the Americas.

As a matter of fact, most of the philosophies of history or social philosophies – to use Sorokin's term – in other societies were focused on the difference between themselves and "others". This difference had been very strong in the identity formation of the group. Greeks labeled people other than themselves as barbarians. Urban settlers defined nomads as savages. Religious narratives categorized believers and infidels into two separate groups. Socialists and Communists thought of two classes: haves and have-nots. All such narratives depicted "others" in horrible ways and demonized them. Similarly, Christian Europeans demonized Turks and Muslims for a long time. However, when they met other civilizations of the Americas and won superiority over them through some luck (lack of horses in the New World), natural causes (epidemics like smallpox), and atrocities they committed with weapons the native Americans did not have, one of the central questions became the status of the other. Although some – Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolomé de Las Casas, to name a few– tried to preserve the rights of native Americans in legal terms based on natural rights and freedom, the dominant narrative and attitude persisted in confiscating the goods and bodies of the natives on the ground that they were not Christians (Akal, 2005). The discussions around the question of the native impacted the subsequent search for natural law, the status of the individual against state power, and the authority to submit, such as Grotius and his theory of natural law, which had a huge impact on political and moral theories of the Enlightenment (Akal, 2005).

This first confluence that shaped the Eurocentric modernity paradigm is between the problem of Turks (Muslims) and the discovery of the New World. From these discussions

of the time – sixteenth century – concepts like nature, natural law, deism, and humanism gained more prominence among intellectual circles along with heated reform and counter-reform debates. Out of these debates, a new type of idealized man was born. Instead of the traditional (gentle)man whose ratio is based upon mutual understanding and compromise with high values like honor for order in the society, this new type was more rational and passionate, looking for higher aims at every step in life, the bourgeois man (Hazard, 1981). Of course, neither the old gentleman nor the new bourgeois man refers to the people outside Europe or the lower-class man inside Europe. "Social contract" discussions in order to solve the problem of evil and restrict the violent side of human nature offered by Enlightenment philosophers were also about this type of new man. In the social contract, the "lesser" strata of society or the rest of the world are not included. When it comes to human rights, it also excluded European lower classes and all non-European people. For example, L'abbé de Ville complained about Pierre Bayle's criticism of him and invited him not to violate "human rights". This crucial rhetorical term that gave Eurocentric modernity claim to sovereignty over the rest of the world was of Christian origin and also developed within the context of contemplating the world in terms of nations, which shaped its last form within the framework of the modern nation-state political system (Asad, 2000).

Encounters with natives in the Americas incited the early anthropological works, which later in the nineteenth century became the most powerful source for Eurocentric modernity's claim to be the superior civilization of all times around the world (Akal, 2005). Anthropological and archeological studies first served to challenge the Christian philosophy of history. Since the Church claimed that the world had four thousand years of history before Christ, critics quickly dazzled the minds of many about how it is possible, given that Egyptian and Chinese historical records and narratives mentioned much older than that. Thus, the birth of chronology and its attack on traditional Christian timeline contributed to the questioning of old claims about "truth" and history per se (Hazard, 1981).

Promises and Critiques

Questioning the claims of traditional historiography together with equating native and local civilizations around the world with the beginnings of civilizations, culminated in a new historiographical understanding given the so-called high status of European economies and political systems (Chakrabarty, 2000). The new understanding is comprised of community-based societies with primitive markets and political institutions, then more complicated monarchies in which subjects are subordinated to one royal authority, and at last the western model of democracy with a complicated free market economy, and free citizens come together to make the best decisions for society. In this superior

civilization, science and rationality were to be ruled, and all the metaphysical references and transcendental institutions were to be abolished. History flows in only one direction, a unilinear progressivity. With all nonsense, irrationality, and unrightful claimants (church, palace, aristocracy) eliminated, "emancipated" individuals work for their own and society's good, and they will only prosper in peace because all the violence, wars, and plagues would be discarded. Modernity fulfilled some of its promises. People have longer life expectancy, many disastrous pandemics and illnesses are cured, people move from one destination to another at a rapid pace, consume better nutrition, and so on. Yet, its side effects were so destructive. All the developments in every domain of life brought many risks and hazards (Beck, 1992). It irrevocably disrupted the traditional bonds like community, neighborhood, produced new kinds of limits on freedom, and discarded some of the population as disposable garbage (Taylor, 1995; Bauman, 2018). These kinds of critiques of the Eurocentric modernity within were full of Western publishing. One of the sternest critics who also impacted many afterwards was Nietzsche. He warned about the nihilist potential of this kind of materialist civilization devoid of any transcendentality (Küçükalp, 2010). Almost all of these critiques dealt with the negative side effects of modernity, sometimes including affected non-Westerners, sometimes not. What is needed is more of a total critique of modernity as a social philosophy of the colonialist mind. First of many steps towards this could be anthropologizing the European Enlightenment and modernity, as well as revealing its ethnic dimension, as Asad and Ahmad suggested, because their history is far from being a universal one (Ahmad, 2017). Another step could be showing the direct link of modernity and coloniality, like a couple of South American scholars did in terms of knowledge production and decolonizing Western epistemology during the 1990s (Mignolo, 2007).

Idealistic and idealist narratives about the modernity paradigm, which gave European norms and models the highest value over the rest of the world, should be met with caution because they belong to a discourse of colonialist mentality that try to show the difference and demarcation between the colonizer and the colonized. Analysis focusing on more mundane and material development of the history of Eurocentric modernity could tell another story. For example, the industrial revolution crushed and oppressed the lower classes, women, and children in the far-west (Britain, France, Germany, later the United States) countries. Aggressive Western imperialism and colonialism, which gave the economic resources that the industrial revolution needed, robbed the owners of those lands of their property, land, culture, and so on.

Authors that Sorokin compared in his seminal text were Spengler, Toynbee, Schubart, Berdyaev, Northrop, Kroeber, and Schweitzer, all born in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, including Sorokin himself. They all wrote during the first half of

the twentieth century, towards the end of which Western civilization and the modernity paradigm became a center of question and crisis after two destructive world wars. Only Nikolai Danilevsky was born early in the nineteenth century and wrote during the second half of the nineteenth century. He and other authors were critical of the contemporary historical accounts of modernity and tried to reformulate their understandings of human civilization (Sorokin, 1952). Despite their efforts to correct the nineteenth-century progressivist narrative, it remained futile partly because the time for criticizing and neglecting the big theories had come, and they were neglected as a result. Although there were considerable differences between the authors' theories, Sorokin claimed that theirs and his own are similar in many ways (Sorokin, 1952). In a nutshell, Sorokin and others tried to complicate the smooth and total character of the modernity paradigm, never questioning it on fundamental grounds.

Final Version and the Last of the Grand Narratives

The Western modernity paradigm still persists, though it has been open to minor revisions. The narrative had not been constructed through one or two foundational texts. It was mainly constituted during the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century with social/sociological theories of the figures like M. Weber, K. Marx, A. Comte, E. Durkheim, G. Simmel, F. Tönnies, V. Pareto, H. Spencer, and many who were canonized within the discipline of sociology – that is reserved for modern western societies alone (Connell, 1997). They were supposedly in search of universal rules that govern societies, but followed the peculiarity of Western civilization. Most of these so-called founding fathers were deeply influenced by an anthropological way of looking at non-Western societies, searching for the fundamental differences between Western and non-Western institutions. Sociological theories and research of that time – more densely during the Victorian era – worked for showing the "global difference" between the West and the rest (Connell, 1997).

Modernity as a paradigm or total social philosophy can be considered the last of the meta-narratives. This narrative is based on showing the difference between contemporary times and the past, and between the West and the rest of the world, as mentioned above. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century European philosophers and social theorists were obsessed with the superiority of the West over the rest of the world (Sayyid, 2017). Despite stern critiques towards the linear narrative or the totality of modernity paradigm, that mental formulation of "global difference" still persists in many domains, and the modern historical time continues to appeal to many all over the world (Simon & Tamm, 2023). This is partly because there is no alternative paradigmatic narrative that could challenge the Eurocentric modernity.

Modernity's bold claims and its promises, together with its impact on developing human

life and materiality, brought the discussions of the end of history to the fore. Its idealized liberal socio-political system was thought of as the ultimate form of human governance for supposedly everyone's interests. Only it was not. It neither brought happiness to all nor solved the erstwhile problems. However, its narrative as the end of history remained the same. In other words, it was not the end of history, but rather the end of the philosophy of history. In fact, the very raison d'être of the modernity paradigm was its destruction of all past and present traditions and alternative narratives. During the aggressive Western imperialism, European powers made sure of it. Thus, it succeeded in such an imminent promise. After the end of the Cold War, the reason for the attack on Islamic societies and civilization by Western powers in the name of democracy and liberal ideals seems appropriate in this sense. There should be no alternative readings of history and the future. Towards this goal, an incarnate enemy needed to be built in the name of strengthening Western ideals (Sayyid, 2017). Samuel Huntington and even before him, Bernard Lewis, claimed that future conflicts were to be cultural and between Islam and the West (Huntington, 1996; Ahmad, 2017). This is because a total narrative/social philosophy that still might find resonance potentially exists in Islamic civilization.

The construction of superiority of the modern West over the rest of the world in social theory coincided with the aggressive imperialist expansion of the European powers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is the second confluence that has determined the character of the meta-narrative of modernity. Rise of the colonial expansion and exploitation nurtured the thought of western perfection of human civilization, with non-Westerners lagging behind or reaching that level not yet (Chakrabarty, 2000). On the other hand, social/sociological theories that particularize Western modernity reinforced the colonial mindset. In other words, the very intellectual reasons that gave way to the rise of modernity narrative influenced and were influenced by the experience and methods in the colonies by the Western powers (Quijano, 2007). Quijano focused on the production of knowledge and the subordination of alternative knowledge systems outside of Europe. He also acknowledged the existence of critiques of modernity and its totality within the Western paradigm, but they stayed limited within the paradigm (Quijano, 2007).

Conclusion: Modernity as a Colonial Project

Obsession with proving the difference between the West and the non-West, mentioned above, is precisely linked to the colonialist understanding of drawing a boundary between the colonizer and the colonized. Fanon elaborated on this point in his seminal works "Black Skin White Masks" and "The Wretched of the Earth". Another point he made is the violence the colonizer had used towards the colonized. It is the exact violence – physical and psychological – that Eurocentric modernity paradigm also had in its discourse towards the non-modern and non-western (Fanon, 2004). As the negative consequences

of modernity became evident, partial and inner critiques had made efforts to particularize the Europeanness of modernity in a slightly different way. For example, Charles Taylor and J. Habermas – whose public space excluded not only non-Westerners but also lower classes within Europe, which is understood clearly after the latest Israeli atrocities towards Palestinians – also underlined that modernity is a European phenomenon. Quijano and his colleagues, like Enrique Dussel, were also well aware of this fact in their project of de-linking from Eurocentric "coloniality of power". According to Dussel, though modernity is a European phenomenon, it is a European phenomenon which is in a dialectical relation with the non-European (Mignolo, 2007). In other words, the western European mindset constructed the whole globe as the "other" of itself through the narrative of modernity, through which they constructed the European identity as we know it today (Sayyid, 2017).

In conclusion, modernity is a specific way of reading world history connected to the developments, problems, challenges, and ideas within Europe that projected a nihilist future as predicted by Nietzsche, which exhausted all possible alternative worldviews and civilizations. This project is deeply connected with the colonialist mindset and practice. They are inseparable from each other. Last but not least, post-colonial debates and movements also coincided with post-modern revisions of Eurocentric modernity, resulting in a softer and flexible modernity and indirect colonialism. Political forms were homogenized within the framework of nation-states, and almost all social philosophies that could narrate an alternative history and future for humanity have gone to the dust of history thanks to Eurocentric modernity/coloniality. On the other hand, the world is becoming a less secure place for all, every day, due to the natural consequences of modernity and aggressive politics of the Western powers that remind us of hardcore colonialist violence. In this respect, contemplating a new kind of social philosophy or metatheory that is alternative to the Eurocentric modernity seems required more than ever.

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