

**An Analytic Account of The Phenomenon of Modernity  
with Specific Reference To The Way in Which The Acknowledgement of  
Multiple or Alternative Modernities Impacts The Comprehension of The  
Phenomenon**

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2024.v09i07.018 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2024.v09i07.018>

Received: 15 July 2024 / Accepted: 26 July 2024 / Published: 31 July 2024

**ABSTRACT**

*The term modernity refers generally to an amalgamation of historically unprecedented practices and institutional forms, organizational and knowledge advances, breaking away from one's obsolescent predecessors, simultaneously. The European traditions such as Renaissance and Enlightenment are referred to specifically as this breaking point. Some basic features of modernity can be described as- a general stress on the application of rational scientific approach to problems and the pursuit of material and economic well being. Accompanied by the values like, instrumental rationality, objectivity, liberty and equality. The theories of modernity have generally been classified into two broad categories, cultural and acultural. Among these two views of modernity, the acultural view is dominant. This acultural theory and its dominance is the point of contention here, as it views modernity to be a culture neutral phenomenon, which has the same trajectory everywhere. This, the essay shows, is a distorted understanding of the phenomenon of modernity and has quite problematic implications, as the belief that modernity comes from one single universally applicable operation served as the basis and justification for the western colonizers' practices of domination and cultural homogenization. This essay argues that a) modernity is not something that only the west has been blessed with, rather there are multiple modernities. b) It highlights how an exclusive reliance on the acultural theory deprives us of and unfits for understanding and identifying alternative modernities that are different from and that challenge the dominant western conception of modernity.*

**Keywords:** Modernity, Enlightenment, Instrumental rationality, Alternative Modernity, Acultural view of modernity.

## **Introduction**

The acultural understanding - according to Charles Taylor is, “to see the change from earlier centuries to today as involving something like “development”, as the demise of a “traditional” society (for)and the rise of the “modern” (p.24). For example, presenting the increasing operation of reason and technology, as resulting in the erosion of the claims of God and the sacred order of society. Rajeev Bhargava addresses this as the institutional or IT complex. This transition is seen as a culture-neutral phenomenon that any society could undergo. For example- the conception of modernity as the growth of scientific temper and the resulting industrialization, urbanization and increased mobility and the like. Both Taylor and Bhargava find this kind of understanding to be problematic. The Cultural understanding- is “one that describes the transition in terms of the rise of a new culture with its specific constellation of understandings of the person, nature and good in contrast to all others, including its own predecessor civilization” (pg.24). It sees the point of view in which one sees her own culture as one among others. Hence Taylor finds it obvious for the first accounts of revolutionary change to be acultural. These theories hold that Institutions are rule-bound practices and all practices are partly constituted by values and beliefs that give these practices a normative direction. So, in speaking of a particular set of social and institutional practices we also refer to particular cultural systems. The Cultural theories of modernity reject the distinction between culture and the IT-complex.

## **Issues with the implications of the dominant acultural theories**

- a) The cultural theory of modernity, in a way, implies that modernity comes from one single and universally applicable operation, as already mentioned above. This as we can draw from Charles Taylor’s account of the phenomenon is a false claim. Taylor argues that there’s a certain social imaginary that’s constitutive of the phenomenon of modernity and there can be various/different social imaginaries depending on the context. He argues that different societies have, in different contexts, divergent conceptions of the moral order of society, this conception mutates into social imaginary(p.92). He defines a social imaginary as a given people’s imagination of their collective social life, a common understanding that makes possible common practices with a widely shared sense of legitimacy. Taylor argues that we, therefore, need to recognize that modernity is not the phenomenon that has occurred only in the west, instead there are multiple modernities. This implies that the west and non west have modernized in their own different ways. It’s about how ordinary people in history came to see and transform their realities through their dialectical interaction with the surroundings (with recourse to the given conceptual spaces). It is this moral order which Taylor argues was stated in the natural law theories of Locke and Grotius. (which played a fundamental role in shaping the imaginary constitutive of modernity in the

west. These natural law theories in contrast to the earlier theories of the state projected human beings as equal, rational sociable agents who would collaborate into peace for their mutual benefit. This resulted in one kind of cultural revolution that led the society out of a structurally determined and religiously dominated pre modern social system, resulting from secularization of our beliefs and values).

- b) The problem with the acultural theories is that they describe the transition from pre-modern to modern in terms of loss of traditional beliefs and bonds(pg.25), it doesn't consider that the changes in culture and outlook owe anything to their own inherent power/moral ideals, whose intrinsic attractions can help in explaining their rise. This Taylor argues is a misunderstanding. He argues that the social and institutional changes must themselves be explained in terms of the human motivations (culture specificity), that moved people in one direction. According to him modernity, by which he specifically refers to the western/acultural view, is in part based on an original moral outlook. He argues that in the West, science itself has grown in close symbiosis with a certain culture (p.27), hence endowed with certain characteristic self-understandings and purpose. Therefore, the acultural view that modernity is culture neutral is wrong. Here Bhargava's example of the capitalist system as one that's based necessarily on savings and reinvestments, which in turn requires curtailment of immediate desires, suggesting people to exercise restraint on passions without renouncing the world(pg.7), serves as fit explanation of how some aspects of the modern constellation, are closely interwoven with our understandings(cultural views) of science and religion, which the acultural theory misses out. In this way, the acultural theory gives a flawed and impoverished understanding of ourselves, the other and the modernity itself, through misclassification and narrow vision.
- c) The acultural understanding of modernity imposes a falsely homogenizing, uniform pattern on the multiple encounters of non-Western cultures with the exigencies of science, technology, and industrialization. This belief implies that the paths of different civilizations are bound to converge, implying that its logical/rational to expect that the other cultures will end up looking like Europe/west.

As Quijano Anibal has rightly pointed out, d) modernity/rationalism was used by the European colonizers to perpetuate domination through instrumentalization of power. The notion of dichotomous subject-object relationship, which supposes that only the subject in this case the European male is capable of rational thinking, thinking for itself and the other, thus objectifying the non-west and along with it creating a mystified image of knowledge. This accompanied with the organicist view of society as a closed totality with functional relations among each and every part, in which the European male plays a controlling role, just like the brain does in the human

body and the rest, in this case the dominated/colonized, as coordinating units, just like the limbs, gave rise to the colonial structure of power, of specific social discrimination. This organist view that became the basis and justification for the European domination, overlooked the fact that it's also the organs/limbs that equally direct the brain, for example it's organs that sense the environmental movements/changes etc. and so the brain processes and directs oneself accordingly. If we view it from this angle, the organicist view that the colonial ideas of the superiority of the dominant and the inferiority of the dominated were based on, is completely absurd(p.171). such conceptions and arguments led to the codification of local/ethnic groups along racial lines based on skin color, combined with geo cultural identities like black-Africans, brown-Asians, white-Europeans and like, further entrenched hierarchies of colonial power. which became the basis for division of work in the colonial capitalist system. Thus, despite modernity's claim of equality, coloniality has certainly entrenched unequal relations through institutions like race. Quijano, also explains how e) the glorification of colonial modernity led the dominated to adopt these discriminatory categories and express themselves in terms of their colonizers, which signifies the capturing/colonizing of even their imagination. Hence, even after decolonization and the elimination of political colonialism there continues a "cultural colonialism". All these distorting and devastating impacts of the acultural theory especially when it comes to interaction with the other cultures, necessitate, along with Taylor and Bhargava's claim the discovery and acknowledgement of the alternative modernities.

### **Alternative modernity**

Bhargava identifies the hybrid of indigenous culture and western modernity resulting from a creative adaptation as an example of an alternative modernity, for which no analogue can be found either in western modernity or in indigenous tradition (p.9). He argues that a change in its traditional structure and an equally significant difference from western modern institutions along with a change in the understanding inscribed in the social practices is crucial for an alternative modernity to exist. For clearer understanding Bhargava differentiates alternative modernity from "patchwork solution", an unaltered western modernity stitched together with an equally untouched native tradition. For which Bhargava cites the trucks that are a product of modern technology festooned with vermilion and garland indicative of the traditional arrangements to keep the vehicle protected against bad eyes (that might lead to damage). He sites the Indian caste system and secularism as embodying a tendency for alternative modernity. Caste, Bhargava argues, is now reborn as a new collective identity with room for other identity-constituting principles and belief-systems. It once determined an individual's position in society has now turned into a system of more or less equal relations between relatively open and politicized cultural communities. It is now a marker of social separation and cultural identity in the Indian public sphere. Simultaneously, The Indian secularism Bhargava argues breaks away with the

standard policy of religious neutrality or equidistance and has still sustained with success. For example, the right to personal laws on one hand and state intervention in the religion sanctioned practices like the legal ban on triple talaq on the other hand. Bhargava shows how it is different from the western secularism at the same time not reducible to the traditional notion of toleration, which dictates nonintervention even if one finds the practices of certain groups or individuals to be objectionable. Which, however, doesn't contain the notion of equal respect, hence, is incompatible with the very idea of secularism. Necessitated by the dual responsibility of the maintenance of religious liberties at the same ensuring equality and justice the state in India opted for the flexible policy of principled distance, combining both intervention and abstention dependent on the nature and present state of the religions. The very fact that secularism and democratic state sustained in India unlike other postcolonial states which tried to impose the western practices and institutions on their populations, as it is, irrespective of their different cultural background also shows us the consequences of the acknowledgement and non acknowledgement of alternative values and world views.

### **Conclusion**

Modernity with its new outlook has surely influenced the social, economic and other spheres fundamentally. Whereas, it has been emancipatory and liberating on one hand, it's reduction specifically to the acultural understanding has simultaneously had quite negative connotations on the other hand, ranging from the devastating impacts of the perceived view of development, on the non western societies and on humanity in general, to the loss of local cultural identities and forms through colonial domination and discrimination, coming from the belief that western experience of modernity is universally applicable, that it is the mirror of all other societies, which, as discussed already lead to the objectification of the entire non-west, declaring it to be incapable of even, thought and reflection for itself, affirming the superiority of the European colonizers, which became a basis for identification of the self and other and for the allotment of differentiated roles and works on the terms and conditions of the west thus colonizing even their minds. The implications of all these instances, I feel make the search, for a counter narrative, of multiple/alternative modernities quite crucial. An acknowledgement of the multiple/alternative modernities is significant with regard to different background conditions and understandings to reiterates Taylor's point, modernity is not necessarily informed with a discontinuation of the traditional beliefs and values rather they often serve as background conditions and influence the phenomenon significantly and this fact can't be ignored. As we have seen in the Indian case, that the presence of background conditions and understandings that were different from the European context, necessitated the development of, a specific, Indian version of secularism, significantly different from its western model and it's success so far, I believe, substantiates my claim.

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