

Discussion of Eisenstadt's 'Multiple Modernities'

On 28th November, the Working Group session discussed Eisenstadt's concept of 'Multiple Modernities'. As a part of an international academic debate and a point of departure from Weberian scholarly tradition, the text provides a useful theoretical background for comparing different views of modernities while remaining open to new possibilities and debates about the future. Eisenstadt's normative approach sees the concept of modernity as a multifaceted phenomenon. First originated in Europe, this notion developed across the globe while its multiple forms were adjusted to different contexts, appropriated by different actors, and modified according to different ideas. In understanding and explaining social change, Eisenstadt highlights the non-homogenous characters of modernity. As Africa is not part of his analysis, the Working Group session debated the extent to which his conceptualizations are useful tools to appreciate African-rooted discourses about human rights, development and equality.

One of the main points of discussion centred on the lack of a clear and accurate definition of modernity grounded in specific historical contexts. In many ways, this abstract notion implicitly depicts history and future as a part of a linear, yet misdealing, idea of temporality. Additionally, social movements and political environments are often defined through the lens of the nation-state limiting the analysis to narrowly-defined areas. Eisenstadt's understanding of modernity, 'a political and social program linked to social change and protest', can be further challenged by arguments, as in Bruno Latour, that the division of nature and culture as the main project of modern rationality has never been realised.

Drawing upon the history of capitalism and the emergence of nation-states, Eisenstadt assumes that the African continent is the last place to become modern. However other scholars, as Toni Morrison, have indicated slavery and its conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization, as the beginning of modern life. In this way, Africans would be the 'first truly modern people' in the world. Moreover, once modernity is defined as a break with past, the risk is to simplistically reduce pre-modern (traditional) times without appreciating the historical processes from which they came into place. Finally, the text denotes a certain Western tautology of the terms and their uses. Cultures are conventionally taken as fixed phenomena missing their dynamic and evolving character. Glossing over the power that intrudes this notion, the world and its multiplicities are reduced to a discussion of modernities.