

Reflections on Modernity^(*)

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I- Seeds

I was born in a small traditional village in upper Egypt four years before the revolutionary change of 1952 took place. I started my education in Kottab (a traditional self-sustained educational circle for literacy and Quran memorization). After two years I had started modern education at school for six years before being transferred into the nearest town to complete my education. From this town I moved to Cairo in 1967 to study sociology at Cairo University.

During this early transfer from traditional to modern culture, I experienced modernity on different levels: Apart from modern learning, I have acquired some modern life styles including changing of dress, some kinds of food and life styles. I have read about western culture and civilization and have been exposed to different political encounters regarding Western Culture and Civilization:

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1. Anti-colonial discourse that was propagated in Nasser radical political regime that were evolved around socialist ideas. Western politics were looked at as an aggressive, exploitative and colonialist. Concepts such as Arab nationalism, Arab Socialism, non-alignment, third world and imperialism were part of a Larger indoctrination processes that constituted a major part of this era.
2. In the meantime my generation has read some other different views that have been taken un by Egyptian intellectuals towards Western Civilization. Those include:
 - 2-1- Views developed by religious sheikhs such as Refaa El-Tahtawy (1801-1873) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), who admired the Western Culture for its adherence to egalitarianism, freedom and democracy while criticizing some other patterns of behavior that are considered to be strange of our traditional culture. Such arguments came to a conclusion that those good values do exist in Islamic culture but they are left intact.
 - 2-2- Views developed by intellectuals such as Taha Hussein (1889-1973) who argued for an educational policy that considers the Egyptian culture as much more closer to

the European culture than to the Arab culture. Egypt had played an important role in the mediation of world culture and thought. Therefore she should continue this role through strengthening cultural and educational relationship with the north of the Mediterranean.

- 2-3- Views developed by some secular academicians and intellectuals such as Zaki Najeeb Mahmoud (1905-1993) who argued for the necessity of adaptation of positivistic view therefore science, rational thinking and secular education would pave the way to development and progress. Western civilization is considered to be the source of this kind of rational thinking.

II- Stem

Seeds would grew up with reading for an M.A. in "Critical Sociology" and a Ph.D. on "elite formation in rural Egypt". The modern experience was widened by with reading two years in East Anglia University (Britain) and for one year in Bielefeld University (Germany). During this period I have been fascinated by the modern creed. First of all, I developed a deep conviction that modernity was evolved around a pure, enlightened and humanitarian root , which I named "the modern spirit" It

developed in a long process in thought, arts, philosophy and political struggle. From my point of view the modern spirit encompasses four sub roots :

- Individual is the central concept of the world, no matter his affiliation, color, race, religion or class might be.
- General well, justice, freedom and social responsibility of citizens, state, civil society are bases of nation-building.
- Democracy is the best- and perhaps the only- way to organize differences of opinions, achieve the maximum performance of polity and politics and realize the ideal of tolerance, respect of the other and sustain the values of egalitarianism, authenticity and progress.
- Innovations in science, technology and bureaucracy are tools of achieving all the previous ideals and creating a better world.

This pure image of modernity had been supported by further readings in the texts of philosophers and sociologists who theorized the texture of modern life. They uncover modes of transformation of modern societies from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (F. Tonnies) from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity (E. Durkheim), from traditional action to rational action (Max Weber). Reading sociological tradition on

modernity, though uncovered some of the internal contradictions of the development of modern enterprise, it reinforced the image of modernity as a disembodied (disembedded) progressive evolution towards more liberation, more freedom and more humanism. It is a process of historical dialectic towards achieving perfection and real being of the individual.

However, Reading Marxism, critical theory of the Frankfurt school as well as theories of dependency and capitalist world system had given me the chance to look at another face of modernity. Capitalism was seen in this critical tradition as a vehicle of producing alienation, exploitation and class struggle (Marxism); demolishing humanitarian aspects of life and creating unidimensional man (Frankfurt School); colonizing most of the world that resulted in an unequal development and unequal division of labor (world system theories). In fact, such theories had cleared a second face of modernity. Nevertheless, I consider such criticisms an internal self-consciousness of modernity. They are positive for the modern enterprise. It becomes able to overcome some of its shortcomings and to reflect on the main problems and contradictions that it generates.

Theorizing about non-western societies, the modern social thought had been trapped either to ethnocentric stereotyping

using concepts such as a Asiatic mode of production despotic orientalism and underdeveloped world or to normative analysis in which western modern history was taken as a ideal standard that should be followed by all nations regardless of the internal tradition. Reality has proved that this conviction is not true. People of western societies have gathered around their traditions and generated modes of resistance to modernity.

III- Back to Egyptian Reality

Egypt has been there all the time. When I read, think or imagine, Egyptian society is the soul of my study. Egypt is a society with ancient legacy. Historically, it had interacted, culturally, with different civilizations including Greek, Roman, Islamic and modern civilizations. It adopts and melts different religions and cultures. Some Egyptian scholars consider its history as a multi-layer history. Economically, it was an agrarian society that evolved around a central state that lived on taxes and tributes extracted from poor peasants. Agriculture was traditional that depended on primitive technology and the energy of human beings and animals.

Egyptian Society has entered the modern era carrying on its back all this multi-layer history. Modernity started without an

internal root. It comes out of cultural contact with the West, first through internal initiatives of modernization, second through colonial policies and third through post-colonial state.

As a sociologist who read most of modern sociological theories and has his own point of view of the roots of modernity, I was very much occupied with asking questions about my society: is it a modern society? Has it solved the problem of order in a way? has it succeeded in solving the "tradition" problem in its relation to modernity? Do modern facades such as army, police, education, parliament, constitution and political parties reflect a genuine modern values and practices? Those questions are samples of a wide range of questions that rose in mind when observing our daily modern relations. In a number of articles which I published in Arabic in a book entitled "Contradictions of Modernity in Egypt", I hypothesized that the globalization of Western modernity had resulted in creating multiple modernities in different parts of the world, each is characterized by the ways society adopts in dealing with tradition on one hand and modern life on the other. Modernity in Egypt (and in Arab countries) is constituted around modern facades without a root. It had come into being through processes of induced modernization in an uneven and unbalanced

development, consumerism and irrational selection of post-colonial elites. Modernity here does take a clear stand from tradition. Traditions continue to traditionalize modern aspects of social life and modernity continues to modernize traditions. The outcome is a mixture of a "third culture" which is neither traditional nor modern. In such conflict or dialogue continues unsolved.

Reflexive modernity

In the last twenty years, modernity had entered a new era that completely changed the world. Such change has been described in phrases that reflect unease, tension and fear of the future. It is a runaway world (Giddens) characterized by uncertainty (Robertson) disorganized capitalism (C.Offe) and risk (Beck). Reflexive discourse on late or second modernity had turned attention to environmental issues, bioethics, consumerism, conditions of work, future of democracy and other issues.

But seen from outside the center of the world, reflexivity would rise differently. I would not go into details of the popular and journalistic reflections on globalization. Suffice it to mention issues such as poverty, unequal terms of judgment, double standards, domination of one-sided agenda, mass destruction, bias and irrational interventions. I would not go into these details

because they are controversial, instead I might raise two theoretical issues:

The first related is multiplicity and disintegration. I noticed before that globalization of modernity had multiplied cultures through creating different and hazy blue-prints of modern life. Multiplicity as external process turned into internal one that ends in creating internal multiple cultures, beliefs and ideologies. In the absence of consensus, strong nation states, continuous political ideology, and clear-cut social contract, multiplicity of cultures, beliefs and ideologies became a negative process of disintegration. Therefore, while economy and politics integrate with global imperatives, local cultures and social groups disintegrate. Territorialization of social life according to gender, race, religion and any other mode of distinction prevails. A fertile soil of violence, extremism and conflicts is therefore grounded. One can hypothesize, then, that the more the globalization of modernity, the more the multiplicity and disintegration, the more the departure of modernity from its genuine root.

Secondly, reflexive discourse of modernity need to cover issues related to non-western modernities. We have to search for genuine roots of modern creed and /or progress in the local cultures of non-western civilizations. Hegemony and domination

of western model forces people to resist and to regulate their life world apart from modern state and its ideology. Reflections on the history of those civilization, including reflections on colonial experience and its "modernizing role", is important. Reflections on the past should also revive the values of the "modern spirit" of the enlightenment. A number of questions have to be answered. Where are we from such spirit ? Is there anything left from it? Did the "individual" who the main target of modernity realize his real being? Is individual in non-western societies included in the concept? Where is the real freedom, justice and democracy? Why do traditional and religious winds overcome modern winds? Why does irrational behavior overcome the rational one? Why does religion mix or interchange with politics in late modernity?

As for me the eyes and smiles of Mona Liza, continuous, endless, multi-horizon and encompassing the whole world in peace, is the symbol of what I call the "modern spirit". So, at the end of my word may I ask : where are we from the eyes and smiles of the Mona Liza? where are we from the "modern spirit"?