Eigene und fremde Welten 12

Figurations of Modernity

Global and Local Representations in Comparative Perspective

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Representations of Modernity in Colonial Indonesia

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Modernity and the theory of colonialism

In the histories of non-western societies, the period of colonisation is often connected with the introduction of modernity. Although modernity had different configurations in different contexts, its origin is supposed to lie in the European Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. Legal-rational forms of rule, the capitalist economy and the nation-state are said to be phenomena of modernity, which in the wake of colonisation were transferred from Europe to other parts of the world. Neo-institutionalists such as John Meyer argue that, in spite of their cultural embedded-ness, modern societies within the current global order are structurally similar since they are characterised by the extension of the single formal structure of the nation-state.[1] Other social theorists have begun to break up the universality of modernity of western provenance by talking of ›alternative‹ or ›multiple‹ modernities, arguing that the contexts within which modernity unfolded and its subsequent trajectories were subject to great variation.[2]

Colonial situations produced a distinct kind of modernity. Colonial modernity was never a simple copy of the western model, its externalities being remodelled and transformed as agency turned it inwards. More importantly, however, the asymmetrical power relationship that was imported with colonial rule caused western modernity to be introduced only in part and to be maintained from the outside. Colonialism in Southeast Asia not only meant the introduction of western systems of rule and the maintenance of social order by military control; it also entailed the creation of a modern infrastructure, economic system and bureaucracy along with a racist ideology of western superiority. All this was aimed at maximising the exploitation of human and natural resources to the benefit of the coloniser. Classic histories of colonialism deal with the triumph of west-

1 John W. Meyer, John Boli, George M. Thomas & Francisco O. Ramirez, »Die Weltgesellschaft und der Nationalstaat«, in: *Weltkultur. Wie die westlichen Prinzipien die Welt durchdringen,* ed. by John W. Meyer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 85–132.

2 Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (ed.), *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2001); Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Multiple Modernities* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publ., 2002).

ern modernity and the processes of subjugation of indigenous people implicated in its ascendancy. Other kinds of mainstream history writing on colonialism deal with how subjugated peoples contested their marginalisation; or how non-western societies were transformed by colonialism, eventually demanding political emancipation through struggle for independent nationhood.

The connection between colonialism and modernity has been part of global history itself, but can also be linked to a number of specific thematic issues such as race, gender, culture and ethics.[3] Frederick Cooper goes beyond this and discusses the value and limits of thinking about modernity in colonial situations. In his view, the issue is not whether ›modernity *is* singular or plural, but how the concept is *used* in the making of claims‹.[4] He argues against essentialising modernity as the core of colonial rule in the ›modern‹ era, simply because many of the arguments and counterarguments within colonialism rested on this concept. Instead, he calls not for the abolition of the word ›modernity‹, but for its ›unpackaging‹ through historical practice that is sensitive to the many possibilities and openings it offered.[5]

Modernity can only be studied fruitfully as part of locality, set within a particular space and a singular timeframe. As Sorokin observed, the concept of space itself is transformed when applied to socio-cultural phenomena. Socio-cultural space expresses positional relationships and is composed of three main ›planes‹: the system of meanings, vehicles and human agents. The socio-cultural universe, according to Sorokin, is simultaneously ideational (as derived from the system of meanings) and sensate (as represented by manifestations of physical space i.e. vehicles and human agents that ›objectify‹ meanings by turning them into socio-cultural reality).[6]

Space cannot be thought of without its temporal dimension. Sorokin argued that time does not flow evenly in the same group and in different societies, having a strong qualitative dimension. Changes in the understanding of time were a factor in the rise of modernity and also were implicated in colonisation. Modern time was linear and objective since it was measurable. It was also subjective since it pointed towards progress. Through modern technology and the capitalist

3 Paul Gillen & Devleena Ghosh, *Colonialism and Modernity* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007).

4 Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), p. 131.

5 Ibid., pp. 142–149.

6 Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Sociocultural Causality, Space, Time. A Study of Referential Principles of Sociology and Social Science* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), pp. 108–139. The original book was written in 1943.

organization of labour, time was felt to be accelerating. Linear time laid the groundwork for the historical and national consciousness of modernity.[7]

The foregoing discussion suggests that it may be rewarding to try to understand colonial modernity as ›representation‹, as something which links the real and the imagined in a specifically ›modern‹ way. Colonialism refers to a very distinct temporal-spatial setting for modernity. Colonialism can be conceived as a modernizing project, which was wilfully hegemonic in nature. According to Van Doorn, the Dutch East Indies after the middle of the nineteenth century possessed a project-like character, exemplified by instrumental rationality, interventionism and technocratic planning, having the gradual transformation of colonial society as its aim. The triumph of Dutch technology was embodied in the typical Delft Technical University engineering graduate, who went on to build the railroads and irrigation systems in the colonial setting.[8]

This essay explores some instances of the staging of modernity in colonial Indonesia, focusing on the qualitative dimensions of modern colonial space and time. It suggests that modernity not only transformed as well as increased the modes of control, it at the same time entailed the potential for, what I call, the ›reversion of modernity‹. Instead of being merely an instrument of rule, it is argued that modernity was a ›discursive space‹ or a form of representation which was both unsettling for colonial subjects and at the same time reversible in that it had the potential to empower them. My analysis will deal with four dimensions of modernity: its vehicles, advocates, contestations and its transcending of borders.

The Colonial Vehicles of Modernity

The Indonesian Archipelago was a massive expanse, within which the Dutch tried to realise their colonial dreams and thereby enhance their status from being a small state in western Europe to being a middle-sized power in the Asian region. They arrived there early in the seventeenth century and established a trading empire with Batavia (currently Jakarta) as a centrally located port. Starting from the early nineteenth century, a shift occurred away from maritime trade towards an attempt to mobilise the agricultural resources of the main islands of Indonesia. In order to be able to establish territorial control, a concerted effort was needed

7 Ibid., pp. 171–172; Gillen & Ghosh, *Colonialism and Modernity*, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 199, 204–206 and 214.

8 J.A.A. van Doorn, *De laatste eeuw van Indië. Ontwikkeling en ondergang van een koloniaal project* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 1994), pp. 83–87, 95–96 and 112.

to overcome the distances between the many islands; and, also on the islands by connecting coasts with hinterlands. Controlling space was both a political and an economic priority, a matter for public as well as private endeavour.

Whereas the north coast of Java, the island at the heart of the Dutch colonial possessions, had been given a west-east postal service road as a result of a state-led compulsory labour project that was concluded in 1810, the connections between the interior and the coast remained difficult for a long time. It was only after private planters had established huge plantations in South Central Java, in an area that was still nominally ruled by indigenous princes, that they started to lobby for the construction of a railway between the port-city of Semarang and the interior towns of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. In 1860, a transport committee led by engineer T.J. Stieltjes was established, which initiated a flurry of land surveying and mapping activities in an area that had hitherto been largely inhabited by Javanese peasants. Ten years later, in 1870, after a massive enterprise financed from the public purse and involving thousands of mainly Javanese wage labourers, the first trains started rolling between the heartland of Java (*kejawèn*) and the coast.[9]

The completion of the first Dutch railway in Asia was hailed as a triumph of modern progress. The trading community of Java had earlier already submitted several formal petitions to the government expressing gratitude for the granting of the concession to allow the construction of the railway.[10] It clearly had been in the interests of the planters to have a fast and regular vehicle for transporting plantation products to ships waiting in Semarang harbour, and to no longer be dependent on uncertain road conditions during the monsoon season and the on availability of Javanese cart-drivers. For the colonial government, the establishment of a fast connection to the interior of Java was also reassuring, since this area had seen a widespread revolt against Dutch authority between 1825 and 1830, and the system of indirect rule established afterwards was still felt to be a potential risk to the colonial peace.

How critical the railway construction was from the Javanese viewpoint became evident several years before its completion. In 1867 a middle ranking member of the Surakarta court offered to the Dutch Resident a letter that had been sent from Semarang by mail to him and other senior courtiers. It had put him into, what he himself described as, a state of ›bewilderment‹. Copies had also been sent to the leader of the local Muslim community, Kyai Tapsir Anom, and to Radèn Ngabehi Ranggawarsita, a famous court poet and teacher of the

9 Vincent J.H. Houben, *Kraton and Kumpeni. Surakarta and Yogyakarta 1830–1870* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994), pp. 288–289; regarding the importance of railways in the context of empire building, see: Clarence B. Davis and Kenneth E. Wilburn (eds.), *Railway Imperialism* (New York: Greenwood, 1991).

10 National Dutch Archive The Hague, Colonies 5964, File 24 June 1863 F6 kabinet