Eigene und fremde Welten 12

Figurations of Modernity

Global and Local Representations in Comparative Perspective

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Leseprobe

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 western 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 ›un-packaging‹ 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.