From the Idea of "Multiple Modernities" to the Idea of "Multiple Democracies"

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The idea of "multiple modernities" has been widely accepted in the discourse on modernity by scholars in various parts of the world. In this paper I want to show the possibility of deriving the idea of multiple democracies from that of "multiple modernities.

1. "Deep-Seated Reflexivity": The Core of "Multiple Modernities" as a Normative Notion

"Multiple modernities" is not only a descriptive notion, but also a normative notion. Even when S. N. Eisenstadt, one of its major advocators, was using it as a descriptive notion, he did not only mean to propose a new description or narrative of the history of modernity, but he also meant

to argue for the following position: modernization and Westernization are not the same thing.[1] In our times, when the troubles of the Western modernity have been disclosed again and again, to disconnect modernity from "Westernization" is obviously to open a door of hope for those non-Western societies that are in the process of modernization. View in this perspective, Eisenstadt's notion of "multiple modernity" is already not only descriptive, but also normative, although normative in a negative sense.

In Charles Taylor, another major advocate of the notion of multiple modernities, its normative sense is not merely negative, but also positive. Taylor differentiates various conceptions or theories of modernity into two types, cultural and acultural, and defends the cultural theory of modernity against the acultural theory of modernity. If modernity is a product of a particular culture even in the West, according to Taylor, then in various non-Western societies there will come naturally various types of modernity different from the Western type of modernity, because of the fact that different cultures will have significant impact upon the process of change at the starting points of these changes. Taylor calls these modernities "alternative modernities"[2] and on this ground, he uses the term "multiple modernities."

The need to put forward the problem of modernity in this new way can first of all be understood in a cognitive

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1   Eisenstadt, 2000, p. 2-3.

2   Taylor, Charles, "Two Theories of Modernity," 1999, p. 162.

sense: the impact of particular cultures on modernity is a basic fact, and the admission of the notion of "multiple modernities" is a logical result of the admission of this basic fact, whereas to insist on the acultural theory of modernity, hence to regard modernity as single, is to neglect this basic fact. It can also be understood in an instrumental sense: the project of modernity in non-Western societies would not succeed without being combined with the local cultures in these societies. But neither of these are Taylor's focus, according to my understanding. In Taylor's view, the core of the idea of multiple modernities is the immanent value of the multiplicity of modernity: a globally homogenous modernity is not only unfeasible, but also undesirable. Contrary to one's impression in connection with his thesis of "politics of recognition," Taylor's notion of "multiple modernities" is both "cultural" and "normative," and its major normative content is neither the affirmation of the value of the multiplicity of modernities, nor the affirmation of the value of every mode of modernity, but the affirmation of the value of a particular way of seeing one's own and others' modes of modernity, which is "a willingness to be open to comparative cultural study of the kind that must displace our horizons in the resulting fusions," and "an admission that we are very far away from that ultimate horizon from which the relative worth of different cultures might be evident."[3]

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3 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

This reading of Taylor's notion of "multiple modernities" can be supported from another perspective. Although it seems that he wants to defend every group's right to its cultural survival, Taylor actually does not argue for equal protection of those cultures that request to do such terrible things as burning widows, killing female babies and having slaves. Taylor, in fact, admits that there are some norms of conduct that can be trans-culturally consented and he, like Habermas, makes a distinction between "values" and "norms," and thinks that it is easier to reach trans-cultural consensus over "norms" than over "values": "Perhaps we are incapable at this stage of formulating the universal values in play here. Perhaps we shall always be incapable of this. This wouldn't matter, because what we need to formulate for an overlapping consensus are norms of conduct. There does seem to be some basis for hoping that we can achieve at least some agreement on these norms. One can presumably find in all cultures condemnations of genocide, murder, torture, and slavery…"[4] As we said above, with Taylor the idea of "multiple modernities" is derived from the idea of "alternative modernities." It is important to point out here that the idea of "alternative modernities" is in Taylor's mind closely related to his idea of "alternative foundations" of universal norms of conduct.[5] Agreeing with John Rawls,

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4 Charles Taylor, "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights," 1999, p. 125.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

Taylor thinks that "different groups, countries, religious communities, and civilizations, although holding incompatible fundamental views on theology, metaphysics, human nature, and so on, would come to an agreement on certain norms that ought to govern human behavior."[6] Taylor suggests that we should make a distinction between the following three levels: world-wide consensus on some norms of conduct; philosophical ideas in support of these consensuses and legal mechanisms helpful to realizing these consensuses. The consensus on the first level, according to him, can coexist with disagreements on the second and third levels. For example, human rights standards are based on humanism in the West; hence the defense of human rights is indissolubly linked with the exaltation of human agency, while in Buddhism human rights standards can be based on an "alternative foundations" in the form of the demand of ahimsa (nonviolence). Though resorting to the same idea of "overlapping consensus," however, Taylor is motivated very differently from Rawls: while Rawls emphasizes that the public-reason-based justification for public norms can be detached from various world-view bases, Taylor argues that it is crucial for universal norms to be rooted in the particular cultures in which we deeply believe, because they concern how these standards are "experienced" by particular persons.[7] According to Taylor, it

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

7 Charles Taylor, 1989, p. 515.

makes a lot of difference whether we feel bad or guilty simply because we fail to meet these standards or we are "moved by a strong sense that human beings are eminently *worth* helping or treating with justice, a sense of their dignity or value." Regarding it as a question concerned with "the moral sources which originally underpin these standards,"[8] Taylor thinks that although these sources are plural, they are indispensable: "High standards need strong sources. This is because there is something morally corrupting, even dangerous, in sustaining the demand simply on the feeling of undischarged obligation, on guilt, or its obverse, self-satisfaction."[9] For example, if we help a person simply out of our sense of moral obligation instead of sincere concern and respect for this person, he or she may well feel humiliated in addition to being helped.

Recognizing the legitimacy of the "alternative foundations" for norms of conduct, and searching for the "fusion of horizons" of different cultures, requires that one makes a critique and reconstruction of one's own cultural traditions, and be willing to be engaged in dialogues and communications with other cultures. Understood in this way, the notion of "multiple modernities" inherently demands criticism of previous understandings of modernity, searching for new projects of modernity, and learning from other modes of modernity. In short, this is

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8 *Ibid.*, p. 515.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 516.

an expression of the self-reflection of modernity. Refusing this kind of self-reflection is not a mere "intellectual error," and being sincerely ready to have this kind of self-reflection is not merely an intellectual virtue, but an ethical virtue. This, we can say, is the fundamental normative sense of the notion of "multiple modernities."

It is important to notice that this understanding of the normative sense of the idea of multiple modernities is also shared by one of its major advocates: S. N. Eisenstadt. According to Eisenstadt, the cultural and political project called modernity first developed in Western and Middle Europe contains in itself the view of a future characterized by a series of possibilities that can be realized through autonomous human activities. The preconditions for social, ontological and political structures and their legitimation are no longer taken for granted. Around the basic ontological preconditions for the social and political structures of authority there arose a "deep-seated reflexivity" that is shared even by the most radical opponents of modernity.[10] This kind of reflexivity characteristic of modernity, according to Eisenstadt, goes beyond the reflexivity found in the so-called "axial civilizations":

> The reflexivity that developed in the modern program not only focused on the possibility of different interpretation of core transcendental visions and basic ontological conceptions prevalent in a particular society or civilization; it came to question the very givenness of such visions and the institutional patterns

10   Eisenstadt, 2000, p. 3

related to them. It gave rise to an awareness of the possibility of multiple visions that could, in fact, be contested.[11]

Eisenstadt here uses the term "multiple visions," which is obviously similar to Taylor's "alternative modernities" and "alternative foundations." Recognizing multiple visions, and recognizing that these visions are not natural and changeless, in Eisenstadt's view, shows that "one of the most important characteristics of modernity is simply, but profoundly, its potential for self-correction, its ability to confront problems not even imagined in its original program.[12]

2. "Responsible Autonomy": Democracy Considered in the Spirit of the "Deep-Seated Reflexivity"

If we understand the normative core of multiple modernities as a kind of "deep-seated reflexivity," then, in this epoch of "multiple modernities," "democracy" can be a subject for deep-seated reflexivity" in the following senses.

Firstly, although democracy has become a major legitimate form of community life in the modern world, we can ask whether it is the only legitimate form of community life in our times. As few of us can deny, even in the most developed democratic societies, democracy is

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11   *Ibid.*, p. 4.

12   *Ibid.*, p. 25.

not the only legitimate form of community life. In quite a lot of institutions and communities, such as universities, churches, enterprises, even courts, not to speak of military forces, the democratic form of decision-making plays only a marginal role, if at all. This fact is often referred to by conservatives to argue against democracy as a general form of community life in the society at large. In the spirit of "deep-seated reflexivity," we should not be afraid of being labeled "conservative" for paying this fact the amount of attention it deserves.

Secondly, although democracy has become a major legitimate form of community life in the modern world, we can ask why it is accepted to be so. Democracy, in its essence, is a form of community life in which each member of a community participates in the process of making and implementing the rules that regulate all members of the community, including her/himself. Democracy in this sense is legitimate for two major reasons: it respects each individual's dignity, because all human individuals are equal and none of them should be placed under any other individual's rule without his or her consent; it is to each individual's interest, because the person who knows his or her best interest is this person her/himself, and nobody can speak for this person without his or her authorization. Put these two considerations together and we may say that the essential principle of democracy is the principle of "responsible autonomy."

Here I would like to make the following additional comments.

It is true that the idea of autonomy, or the idea that the subjects to which the rules of collective actions apply are also their makers, is the only typically modern source of political legitimacy, although it is not necessarily the only actual source of political legitimacy in our times. The major force of the social contract theory in political thinking, in my view, lies in its ability to provide the most acceptable answer in modern times to the person who asks "why should I follow this rule": "Why not, if you have already agreed to or if you have already taken part in the process of making this rule?"

But the idea of autonomy should not be understood in absolute terms. A person can be seen to be suitable for practicing autonomy only on certain conditions. It is widely admitted that persons below a certain age and under certain medical conditions are not capable of autonomy. In the same spirit, it has also been argued that people not specialized in certain fields should not be regarded as suitable for making decisions for themselves on issues in these fields, otherwise they would be practicing their autonomy in an irresponsible way. While we should be cautious lest this kind of arguments be used by conservatives to oppose democracy in principle, we should keep this in our minds when arguing for democracy as the constitutive principle of modern society. Democracy, therefore, should not only be based on the principle of autonomy; it should rather be based on the principle of responsible autonomy.

In democratic politics we should not only be responsible to ourselves, but also to our fellow members of the same community; we should not only be responsible to our own particular communities, but also be responsible to human species as a whole. In our times, we have two special challenges, security and sustainability. Both challenges give much more weight to expert knowledge and inter-generational justice, hence to the idea of responsible autonomy. As an example I want to refer to Jürgen Habermas's recent concern with the dangers of possible democratic legislation for human cloning.

Habermas's discourse theory of democracy, generally speaking, aims to strengthen the link between autonomy and responsibility, or the link between will and reason. The democratic principle, according to Habermas, "states that only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted."[13] Among the questions that are to be discussed in the discursive process are the moral, ethical and pragmatic questions. In our modern and increasingly complex societies, not only pragmatic questions, but also moral and ethical questions, can be highly complicated, if not technical. A public sphere that is enlightened in Habermas's sense, therefore, requires a very important role to be played by experts in various fields. It also requires that philosophers play a role as interpreters

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13   Habermas, Jürgen, 1996, p. 110

and mediators between these fields, in addition to the
role of mediating between the everyday life on the one
hand and the expert cultures on the other.

In his discussion on the issue of human cloning, Hab-
ermas continued to rely on his discourse theory of de-
mocracy, but seemed to put more emphasis on respon-
sibility vis-à-vis autonomy. Since the turn of the last
century, two major events imposed upon Habermas the
same question from different angles: the terrorist attacks
of the September 11 of 2001 imposes the problem of the
survival of human beings, and the issue of human clon-
ing imposes the problem of the survival of human beings
as human beings. Both events are possible partly as a re-
sult of the development of modern science. But the sec-
ond event is possible also as a result of the development
of modern democracy. With modern bio-science as an
instrument, there is now a danger that a moral commu-
nity or a liberal democratic community, as defined in his
discourse theory, can be self-destroying not only by leg-
islating against its members with regard to what they do
(by passing a law that limits the freedom of some of its
members, for example), but also by legislating against
its members and even the whole members of the species
with regard to the question who they and their coming
generations will be as human individuals (by passing a
law that allow human reproduction through human clon-
ing, for example). Facing this kind of challenge, Haber-
mas seems to think it too weak to resort to his discourse

theory; in addition to the latter, which is the latest version of secular morality, Habermas now seems to need a defense of the morality of justice and solidarity on the basis of those traditional resources that are still accepted by many people in our times, including religious traditions, and he does so not only because he needs to appeal to those who believe in religions, but also because he thinks that "only religious language has yet been able to give a sufficiently differentiated expression" to some deeply important moral feelings.[14] For example, human individuals are both equal and autonomous,[15] and some deeds are not only morally wrong but also profoundly evil.[16] What philosophy can do here is to try to provide a secular translation of the deep-seated human self-understanding in religion, so that people of other religions as well as secular societies can better understand each other.[17] This may be taken as a case in which philosophers play a very important role if democracy is to be practiced in a more responsible way.

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14 See Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," in Habermas, 2003, p. 114.

15 See Jürgen Habermas, "The Debate on the Ethical Self-Understanding of the Species," in Habermas, 2003, p. 78.

16 See Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," in Habermas, 2003, p. 110.

17 See Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," in Habermas, 2003, p. 114.

3. "Multiple Democracies": "Responsible Autonomy" Under Particular National Conditions

If the essence of democracy can be understood as "responsible autonomy," then, from the idea of "multiple modernities" we can derive the idea of "multiple democracies". And this, for two reasons. On the one hand, if modernity as a whole is deeply entangled with particular cultures in various regions of the world, then democracy as a major element of modernity must be inherently connected to these cultures as well. On the other hand, in the spirit of "deep-seated reflexivity" characteristic of multiple modernities, we can look for the meaning of democracy as a way of practicing "responsible autonomy" under particular national conditions.

Here I want to refer the work of a Chinese philosopher named Feng Qi (1915-1994). Every moral action, Feng said, should fulfill two principles: the principle of self-consciousness (or the principle of reasonable thinking) and the principle of self-willingness (or the principle of free will). The principle of reasonable thinking is a principle with regard to one's reason, and the principle of free will is a principle with regard to one's will. These two principles can be seen as being implied in what I called above the idea of "responsible autonomy." The reason why I want to refer Feng Qi is that he made an interesting comparison between Chinese and Western cultures with regard to these two principles. In

both cultures, he says, there were thinkers who argued for both principles. Relatively speaking, however, these two principles are given different priorities in Chinese and Western cultures. In China the mainstream Confucian thinkers tended to pay more attention to the principle of reasonable thinking, arguing that if one is clearly aware of the Heavenly Principles abiding in one's mind, he would naturally be willing to follow these Principles in his everyday life, although these principles would require restricting, even denying, his natural desires. By contrast, in the West there has always been a strong tradition of voluntarism, according to which the free will is the first principle of human life, if not of the universe. A major task of the progressive Chinese in modern times, according to Feng Qi, has been to learn from the West the respect for man's freedom of will or man's right to free choice in society while at the same time giving a positive role to the tradition that requires that one bases her/his free choice on reasonable thinking.[18]

Although Feng Qi gave us, here, a picture of convergence rather than divergence between Chinese and Western ways of community life, whether it is called democracy or not, we can make use of the two principles just mentioned in discussing the idea of multiple democracies or the multiple forms of practicing "responsible autonomy" under particular national conditions.

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18 Feng Qi, 1997, p. 27-30.

Firstly, there can be different ways of realizing the principle of reasonable thinking. The major difference between the life of a community composed of different individuals and the life of the individual in this aspect is, of course, that the decision-making in the former case, or the collective decision-making, depends on the reasonable "thinking together" of individual members of the community, rather than on the reasonable "thinking alone" of one individual or of more isolated individuals. That would be the same in the East as in the West. But as soon as we turn our attention to the particular ways of "thinking together" in the process of collective decision-making, we can see that there could be big differences in different cultures. In China, for example, there is a strong tradition of respecting the teacher and appraising education, and in this tradition the teacher-pupil model of inter-personal communication is very influential in many aspects of society. A possibly good consequence of this model is that people of better education and richer experiences can more easily win respect from other people, and the majority of the people can more easily be convinced that they should listen to those who are proved to be wise and virtuous. A possibly bad consequence of this model is that ordinary people can more easily be persuaded by those who mind only their particular interests in the name of a better knowledge of the interests of the general public.

Secondly, there can be different ways of realizing the principle of free will. In terms of the procedures of

expressing individual wills, we can have procedures in which people express their wills directly or indirectly, through personal participation or through their representatives. People can also express their wills in the process of voting for candidates and drafting resolutions or in the process of consultation, and so on. In terms of the personal attitudes of those who are supposed to express their individual wills, we can mention the differences in the level of people's interest in the affairs of their communities, and the level of confidence people have in their own opinions. These differences can result in very different forms of collective decision-making, including democracy.

Finally, there can be different ways in which the principle of reasonable thinking and the principle of free will are combined. As we mentioned above, Feng Qi made a comparison with regard to the different priorities given to these two principles in the Chinese and the Western traditions. On the whole, according to Feng Qi, in the West priority was traditionally given to the principle of free will instead of the principle of reasonable thinking with regard to community life and collective decision-making. That is why in the West the social contract theory has been the most important tradition of democratic thinking and the idea of autonomy or self-rule has been the essential core of the definition of democracy. In China, by contrast, priority was traditionally given to the principle of reasonable thinking instead of the principle

of free will with regard to community life and collective decision-making. In modern times, under the influence from the West, the idea of democracy understood in terms of the social contract theory has been widely accepted in China as well, but people here are still used to giving priority to the principle of reasonable thinking, deeply skeptical about the value of individual free wills that are not believed to be supported by careful reasoning and expert knowledge. In this kind of political culture, the level of democracy within a community tends to be measured by the degree to which the interests of the people are sincerely attended to and efficiently realized by their leaders, rather than by the formal procedures through which people's interests are represented in the making and applying of the rules and policies of the public life.

In recent years many efforts have been made in China to argue for and to experiment with a "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics." It is to a large degree an open question whether there has already been a great deal of achievements in this direction. It is the same with the question of how to evaluate the experiments in the name of "intra-party democracy" or "grass-root democracy" as well as "deliberate democracy" or "consultation democracy" in general. What was said above in this paper is not to give a definite answer to these questions, negative or not, but to defend the thesis that these are open questions. A clear and definite answer to them would need much more research, including empirical research.

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