



Sujata Patel

Modernity: Sociological Categories and Identities

A concern with the meanings of modernity permeates contemporary theoretical reflections in sociology. These debates either examine the substantive part of modernity, i.e. what it is; is it typically western in origin? How did it become a global phenomenon? What institutions characterize its essence? And what kind of impact it made in the world? Or, more often than not, critique modernity at the level of social-philosophical principles, arguing that a specific cultural context constitutes this form of modernity. The critique also frames the assumptions governing the practices of the sociological discipline. A call to redefine the practices of the discipline has been put forward. Both of these debates have led sociologists to ask ontological and epistemic questions regarding the discipline.

Another issue regarding modernity is critical to contemporary discussions but has not found much space in sociological debates. This relates to the use of sociological categories by the state in the making of modern societies in ex-colonial countries. This brief note lays out the terms of this debate as these have been formulated within the disciplines of anthropology and history, especially in and through the subaltern school of historiography, associated with theoretical questions raised through an interrogation of Indian historical material. It suggests a need to interrogate these positions in order to help clarify not only the substantive issues regarding modernity mentioned above, such as attributes and institutions that constitute modern society and the social and philosophical issues prevailing in the practice of the discipline, but also to provide a comparative perspective regarding the growth and origin of primordial identity movements which have become so critical in contemporary modern societies, whether in the west or the ex-colonial and settler south countries.

Current Sociology, July 2000, Vol. 48(3): 1–5 SAGE Publications
(London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)
[0011-3921(200007)48:3;1-5;015449]

Technologies of Power and Identity Formation

In the late 1970s Bernard S. Cohn, the anthropologist of South Asia, in a collection of essays, evaluated three issues: (1) the culture of the colonized, (2) the role of the modern colonial state in the construction of objectified knowledge(s) of the colonized, and (3) the implication of anthropology in the construction of such objectified knowledge (Cohn, 1987). In this book are two seminal articles exploring the nature and content of objectified knowledge of India. The first examined models of rule practised by British colonialism in Africa and Asia. The second evaluated the role played by the census in documenting and codifying groups and the use of this knowledge by various social groups for upward mobility.

Cohn did not present new evidence. South Asian sociologists and anthropologists had already observed and remarked on the way the census had been used to mobilize groups of castes to seek benefits accruing in the modern system where this definition had value. One anthropologist had also suggested that census knowledge was, in fact, redefining the caste system. Cohn drew attention to the larger question of the involvement of anthropological knowledge about colonial and postcolonial societies in the construction of identities. He argued that there was a close relationship between structures of knowledge, structures of domination and identity formation.

Through the asking of questions and compiling of information in categories which the British rulers could utilize for governing, it provided an arena for Indians to ask questions about themselves and Indians utilized the fact that the British census commissioners tried to order tables of castes in terms of social precedence. (Cohn, 1987: 230)

He concludes:

Concern with counting the characteristics of the Indian population, which may have started an intellectual concerns of a few British officials or the administrative necessity of knowing the 'natives' had become an object to be used in the political, cultural and religious battles at the heart of . . . politics which had been crucial down to the present. (Cohn, 1987: 250)

Cohn postulates that the construction of objectified knowledge has been a project of the nation state since the 18th century. In order to establish and maintain its forms of rule, the nation state had to determine, codify, control and represent the nation's past. State building in both imperial and colonized countries was thus a *joint* project, conducted both in the imperial and colonized regions and involved in the institutionalization of procedures, practices and modalities for the 'documentation, legitimation, classification and bounding' of information of the colonized people. Various institutions and groups of specialists were involved in the making of this project: on one hand, the educational institutions, such as universities, that provided the skills for putting into practice objectified knowledge, and on the other hand, the

knowledge that made this possible, anthropology. The epistemological modality of anthropology, Cohn (1997: xiv) contends, has been an integral part of the cultural project of colonialism.

The argument of a close association of anthropological categories with the making of a modern state finds a resonance in the later work of the subaltern school. Of importance in this context is the recent work of Dipesh Chakravarty (1995b). Chakravarty's contribution is his analysis and evaluation of contemporary ethnic and religious identity movements on the Indian subcontinent. After exploring the history of the ideas regarding communities and identities and the construction of 'others', Chakravarty suggests a need to revisit the enlightenment project. The latter he argues provided the significant moment for the construction and identification of categories through which the many 'others' were created both in the colonizer's territories as well as in the colonized territories.

His arguments rest on the following: first, that colonially instituted practices and knowledge systems affect the formation of new subjectivities in India. That is, an analysis of colonized knowledge systems, such as the census, should be used by the researchers to evaluate emerging politics of identity on the subcontinent. Second, he suggests that nationalism did not create one homogenous political community, a nation. Rather it created many discrete communities of the colonized. The current conflicts should be traced to the way the modern means of governance and communication were used by the state to create new boundaries between communities.

Modernity, its governance and its forms of hegemonization, are key issues in Chakravarty's arguments in understanding and evaluating the formation of communities and identities in India. Just as they sought to give India a standardized legal system, the British also attempted to fix and officialize collective identities (such as caste and religion) as part of the very process of creating a quasi-modern public sphere in India. He concludes that the 'British introduced in India collective identities in an all or nothing manner [which] enabled people to see and organize themselves in light of these categories'.

Specifically, Chakravarty suggests that:

1. The most far-reaching and fundamental innovation introduced by the British was the modern state, not the nation state.
2. The 'experiment' of the sub-continent indicates that the modern problem of ethnicity cannot be separated from modern means of government and communication. The modern public political life in India constructed both Hinduism and caste.
3. The apparatus of government was closely tied to techniques of measurement. From surveys of land and crop output, to prospecting of minerals, from measuring brains to bodies, diets and life spans, the British had the

length and breadth of India, its history, culture and society classified and quantified in detail. The most graphic case was the census. Measurement is central to ideas of fairness and justice and how we understand them, in short to the very idea of good government.

4. The British were liberals at home and imperialist elsewhere. They used oriental categories of castes and religion to categorize people and count them. Thus categories and identities emerged hand in hand.
5. This movement from 'fuzzy' to enumerated did not emerge immediately. But it gave three messages: that communities can be enumerated and that in numbers lay clout; that the social and economic progress of the community was measurable, in the case of the Indian census by tracking one's group share in public life; and that this enabled the government and the communities to devise objective tests for relative backwardness or otherwise, of communities.
6. Given that the connection between governability and measurement, the state and civil society set up competitive structures of identity. In this context, policymaking has limits.

Modernity and Categories

Unlike anthropology, which has recently seen its task as becoming reflective, historical, hermeneutic and political, sociologists who study modernity have rarely discussed the way the links between knowledge and power have opened the utilization of sociological categories for identity construction. While sociological study of the linkages between power and knowledge have led to acceptance of the relativity of sociological thought, the way in which sociological knowledge can also be part of objectified knowledge systems of domination is rarely discussed. These systems of domination construct the 'others' in both the imperialized and the colonized worlds. There is thus an organic link in the creation of the 'other'. Second, sociologists have rarely framed their arguments regarding the substantive issues of modernity or the social and philosophical precepts in terms of the organic linkages between the imperial world and colonized worlds.

Despite the great diversity of positions and theories that this new moment in academic thinking inhabits, there are certain propositions that bind all its practitioners. Unlike the earlier theory of core and periphery that made the latter a passive recipient of the changes in the former (in this case, the core and the periphery, the west and the non-west), the colonizer and the colonized are theorized to be mutually imbricated in the processes of domination and resistance. Thus it is theorized that the colonial project was constantly formulated in a protracted process in which the identity of the colonized 'other' was defined by the colonizer just as the identities of the

'other' were in the imperial world. Identities and subjectivities are located in an analysis of discursive practices. It is therefore no surprise to note that in this project economic logic finds a negligible space (Rattansi, 1997).

The new interest in evaluating communities and identities has been generated against the backdrop of a series of events and processes: the apparent exhaustion of radical class movements and the faith in utopias of classless society, the subsequent shift of the centre towards the right and, in this context, the emphasis on theory as a means to practise politics (Ahmad, 1992). New perspectives have emerged to define this moment: a melange of post-structuralism, postmodernism and theories of sub-alternity has provided tools to strategize ways of thinking, seeing and evaluating social experiences, identities and subjectivities in the contemporary world. In various combinations, these perspectives have reframed academic questions and reorganized social science knowledge, especially the disciplines of anthropology and history.

References

- AHMED, A. (1992) *In Theory: Classes, Nation and Literatures*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- CHAKRABARTY, D. (1995a) 'Radical Histories and Questions of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critiques of Subaltern Studies', *Economic and Political Weekly* 30(14): 751–60.
- CHAKRABARTY, D. (1995b) 'Modernity and Ethnicity in India: A History of the Present', *Economic and Political Weekly* 30(52): 3373–80.
- COHN, B. (1987) *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- COHN, B. (1997) *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- RATTANSI, A. (1997) 'Postcolonialism and its Discontents', *Economy and Society* 26(4): 480–550.