

Reviews

The crisis of global modernity: Asian traditions and a sustainable future

By Prasenjit Duara. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 328. Hardback £57.00, ISBN: 978-1-107-08225-0; paperback £22.99, ISBN: 978-1-107-44285-6.

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The crisis of global modernity is a hugely ambitious, thoroughly absorbing book. In the first instance, it is a book about the rise of the West, one that explains this rise through the domination of early modern circulations of peoples, goods, technologies, and ideas. But it is also a book about the contemporary crisis of the West and, in particular, how a combination of capitalism and nationalism has generated a toxic blend of disenchantment, hubris, and unsustainable development. Duara argues that the acceleration of economic, political, and cultural connections over the last few centuries has produced a relentless drive for expansion, in terms of both resources and territory. For the author, such relentless expansionism cannot continue, at least not without generating ecological disaster. To thwart this disaster, Duara suggests that we turn to Asia and, in particular, to themes of ‘dialogical transcendence’ that predate modernity. Vedic religions in India and Buddhist, Daoist,

and Confucian traditions stemming from the Sinosphere can be renewed in ways that re-enchant modernity.

As well as providing a contribution to accounts of the rise – and potential decline – of the West, Duara has provided a contribution to studies of global modernity. The most interesting part of the book is the section on the intensified interactions after 1500 that drew a lightly connected world into one that was deeply interdependent. Duara shows persuasively how histories of this period should be understood not through ‘internalist’ accounts that stay within the confines of a particularly society, nor through a process of diffusion from ‘the West to the Rest’. Rather, he stresses the logics of incorporation and adaptation through which diverse belief systems, modes of governance, and forms of exchange assumed novel, syncretic forms. To put this in somewhat old-fashioned terms, Duara highlights the uneven, but combined, histories that have forged – and continue to forge – a shared modernity. The modern world did not *become* global; it was *born* global.

The scholarship that lies behind this book is formidable; Duara has written a book of immense synthesis, both historical and theoretical. Given his corpus of work over several decades, historians will not be surprised by the richness of this historical survey. They may be more surprised – hopefully in a good way – by the depth of his theoretical engagements. *The crisis of modernity* engages figures as diverse as Weber, Simmel, Foucault, and Deleuze, while incorporating insights from

complexity theory, world systems analysis, and historical sociology.

My quibbles about the book stem from its two ‘master concepts’ (p. 3): circulation and transcendence. Neither are as clear as they might be. Circulation implies a return of some kind, indicating flows within a system that is, to some extent, closed. *The crisis of modernity*, however, is at pains to stress the open-ended and non-linear character of historical development (here the relationship to complexity theory is sharply felt). If this is right, circulation means little more than connections. It is puzzling, then, that Duara does not simply use the latter term, or engage with Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s work on ‘connected histories’ (even more so given that he does cite Subrahmanyam’s historical scholarship). There are any number of ways of examining the connections that Duara sees – quite rightly – as generative of historical development: entanglements, flows, interactions, networks, and so forth. He does not explain why circulation works better than these alternatives.

Transcendence is an even thornier concept. For Duara, transcendence is a ‘yearning’ that ‘draws on a non-worldly moral authority’ (p. 6). Much of the second half of the book outlines the systems of dialogic transcendence, derived in pre-modern Asia and refashioned over the past few centuries, which offer sustainable forms of development. But, after reading the book, I remain unclear what ‘non-worldly’ implies, particularly when directed at ecological issues. Most contemporary ecological movements construct coalitions with indigenous peoples, whose cosmologies are founded on the necessary interdependencies between people and nature. Ecuador’s ‘Rights of Nature’ provision within its constitution is one example among many. At the same time – and as Duara acknowledges – all transcendental visions are, to some extent, institutionalized. Ideas do not float freely; they require organizing. They are literally brought down to earth,

whether in the form of social movements or of more regularized sites of political authority.

It is also not clear why we should expect boundless ‘non-worldly’ visions to be benign. As Duara acknowledges, many such visions combine ‘certitude and absolutism’ (p. 186). Indeed, the decoupling of ‘truth’ from time, place, and history has often generated considerable violence – just think of apocalyptic movements of various kinds, the histories of many revolutions, and more. Do we really want to put our trust in visions that claim to be transcendent? Probably not. While I am sympathetic to Duara’s notions of ‘shared sovereignty’, such an ideal surely requires a *worldliness* that stresses the connections between cosmologies and nature. Only then might we restrain the authoritarian wings of these visions. And only then might we generate the ‘sustainable modernity’ that Duara favours, one based on re-appropriating the ‘global commons’ through coalitions of ‘civil society, local communities and their allies’ (p. 288).

The intimacies of four continents

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In this study of transnational relations across the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British empire, identified in the book’s title as ‘the intimacies of four continents’, Lisa