

EDITORIAL

Compressed Modernity - Book Symposium

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The concept of compressed modernity has often been taken as a shorthand for a developmental process that, in the case of South Korea, occurred in a temporally greatly condensed way featuring explosive growth rates and rapid political and social change while, for example, throughout Western Europe similar processes took several centuries to unfold. By the 1990s, the processes had turned Janus-faced for South Koreans, when the Asian financial crisis led to near national economic collapse and caused annual growth rates of GDP per capita to sharply plunge into the negative, necessitating IMF bailouts. This crisis, Chang Kyung-Sup argued at the time, also exposed many seemingly built-in, structural fault lines within societies of compressed modernity which rendered “the very mechanisms and strategies for achieving rapid national development [...] as fundamental obstacles to current and future development”.¹

Chang Kyung-Sup: The Logic of Compressed Modernity. Cambridge, UK; Polity Press, (ISBN: 978-1-509-55288-7) 2022, 240 Pages.

Since the early 1990s, Chang Kyung-Sup has worked continuously to elaborate the seemingly incomparable and curious complexity of contradictions that characterizes South Korean society.² In *The Logic of Compressed Modernity*, this thirty-year quest not only has found its magisterial formulation in presenting compressed modernity as “a generic category of modernity,” but also its due place among the seminal works of critical modernity debates.

While Shmuel Eisenstadt³ may well be credited with issuing in the pluralist turn in the global study of modernity by proposing the concepts of multiple modernities which effected a decentering of occidental self-descriptions by no longer viewing modern constellations elsewhere as mere variations of Western modernity, other scholars like Ulrich Beck,⁴ Anthony Giddens⁵ or Bruno Latour⁶ focussed on the creation of a new analytical framework for understanding the contours of non-traditional, reflexive modernity as a result of the structural disruption and radical self-transformation of Western industrialized societies through discontinuous processes of pluralization, individualization, and globalization. Göran Therborn’s concept of entangled modernities,⁷ on the other hand,

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1. Chang Kyung-Sup: Compressed modernity and its discontents: South Korean society in transition, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 30-55, p. 31, DOI: 10.1080/03085149900000023.

2. See, for example, *Family, Life Course, and Political Economy: The Micro-Foundations of Compressed Modernity (in Korea)*. Seoul: Changbi, 2009; *South Korea under Compressed Modernity: Familial Political Economy in Transition*. London: Routledge, 2010; "Compressed Modernity in South Korea: Constitutive Dimensions, Historical Conditions, and Systemic Mechanisms." Youna Kim (Ed.): *The Routledge Handbook of Korean Culture and Society: A Global Approach*, pp. 31-47. London: Routledge, 2016; Chang, Kyung-Sup and Son Min-Young: "The Stranded Individualizer under Compressed Modernity: South Korean Women in Individualization without Individualism." *British Journal of Sociology* 61(3), pp. 540-65.

3. Eisenstadt, Shmuel. "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129(1), 2000, pp. 1-29.

4. Beck, Ulrich. "The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization." In: Beck, Ulrich, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, pp. 1-55. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994; Beck, Ulrich, Wolfgang Bonss, and Christoph Lau. "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization: Problematic, Hypotheses, and Research." *Theory, Culture and Society* 20(2), pp. 1-33.

5. Giddens, Anthony. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

6. Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*, transl. by Catherine Porter, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

7. Therborn, Göran. "Entangled Modernities." *European Journal of Social Theory* 6(3), 2003, pp. 293-305.

emphasised the temporal rather than the institutional aspect of modernity by analysing different, competing master narratives, different social forces of, and conflicts between, modernity and anti-modernity, and different cultural contextualizations of the past-future contrast and their entanglement with each other. By addressing some of the most essential properties of compressed modernity as they manifested themselves in the South Korean context, Chang has sought to shed light on the diverse dimensions of its emergent patterns of social change by situating them within their concrete historical and societal contexts and simultaneously systematically examining its global historical and structural conditions.

However, it is not only the analytical strength and the longevity of the compressed modernity-thesis that attests to its methodological and explanatory value for describing and making sense of a set of specific South Korean trajectories, distinct economic, social and cultural configurations and for identifying those factors detrimental to sustainable economic growth. Interestingly from today's vantage point, some of the very factors that rendered the South Korean economy unstable and collapse-prone are also characteristic of Europe's current start-up ecosystem, for example a rapid growth orientation as opposed to stable profit making; an excessive reliance on investment capital and concomitant excessive debt ratios; exaggeration of corporate assets on the basis of turnover and growth figures rather than actual profit margins.

I am delighted to introduce this book symposium which provides an opportunity to revisit and recontextualize Chang Kyung-Sup's most influential theoretical contribution, but also to (re)frame the future conversation by discussing its global implications for current socio-economic scholarship. It features essays by a group of distinguished scholars, to all of whom I would like to extend my sincere thanks for their commitment to this endeavour.

Though contributors to this symposium were invited to approach *The Logic of Compressed Modernity* from within their own disciplines and from their analytical angle of choice, they were also asked to assess the key theses of Chang's book and reflect on problems left insufficiently articulated or roads not taken. The questions and critiques they raise here will be conducive – so we hope – to open up promising new lines of inquiry and provide us with an enriched understanding of the key issues at stake. The contributions to this issue also highlight the potential for mutual learning between European and Asian scholarly environments. With distinct historical, cultural, and geographical contexts, these two regions offer unique perspectives on the challenges and opportunities associated with transitional modernities.

I am especially grateful to Chang Kyung-Sup, who readily agreed to reply to the contributions on his work featured in this symposium, and who has been as forthcoming and meticulous in doing so as any editor could wish for.

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