

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Compressed Modernity and Its Life World Predicaments: Replies and Elaborations

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[I]

The five review essays offered on my book, *The Logic of Compressed Modernity*, in the current book symposium commonly yet complementarily suggest that the thesis of compressed modernity has wide potential—for that matter, diverse necessities—to be applied and assessed beyond the mainly discussed realities of South Korean history, society, and politics as follows:

Jamie Doucette's essay, "Parallel Problematics?"¹, underlines numerous spatial conditions and manifestations of compressed modernity that are broadly associated with or directly analyzed in numerous significant works by critical geography scholars. In so doing, he convincingly points to an urgent need to systematically formulate and comparatively explain various spatial regimes or structures of compressed modernity, perhaps as a new scientific agenda between social theory and critical geography. Given that the core problematic of compressed modernity consists in the special temporal-spatial structuration of social phenomena, Doucette's emphatic suggestion for such interdisciplinarily integrative analysis, whether in theoretical or empirical terms, induces me to think that all structural properties of compressed modernity presented in Part II of this book could have been more extensively elaborated in respect to spatial conditions and manifestations. This is not because I was somewhat neglectful of spatial considerations in writing the concerned chapters, but because I turned and remained quite conscious about them—in particular in Chapter 4 ("Internal Multiple Modernities: South Korea as Multiplex Theatre Society"), Chapter 6 ("Complex Culturalism vs. Multiculturalism"), Chapter 7 ("Productive Maximization, Reproductive Meltdown"), and Chapter 9 ("The Demographic Configuration of Compressed Modernity").

Irina Lyan's essay, "A Tale of Two Cities"², enables me to emphasize that we are confronted with a sort of incongruously or antinomically parallel worlds of compressed modernity as effected through West-reflexive aspirations for social, national, and individual libera(liza)tion, institutionalized hyperrealities of nominal liberal polity and/or authoritarian political (economic) project of developmental catch-up. These discordantly parallel worlds of compressed modernity are juxtaposed alongside variegated social backlashes, discontents, and frustrations involved both in each frequently radicalized world and in mutual conflicts and contradictions among them. I have long detected a sort of *unstably tripodical* liberal systems or orders in many Asian societies, which have paradoxically functioned as decisive sociopolitical impetus for many of their historical transitions.³

In Sujata Patel's essay, "Is It Compressed Modernity or Colonial Modernity?"⁴, compressed capitalist development—or, more precisely, developmental

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1. Jamie Doucette: Parallel Problematics? Chang Kyung-Sup's Logic of Compressed Modernity and Critical Human Geography. *Korea Europe Review*, No. 5, 2023, doi 000 000 000 000
2. Irina Lyan: A Tale of two Cities: Revisiting Compressed Modernity(ies) and their Logic(s). *Korea Europe Review*, No. 5, 2023, doi 000 000 000 000
3. This is indeed one of the most crucial themes to be explored in my next book in 2024, *The Risk of Compressed Modernity*.
4. Sujata Patel: Is it Compressed Modernity or Colonial Modernity? South Korea today. *Korea Europe Review*, No. 5, 2023, doi 000 000 000 000
5. Yuriy Savelyev: Compressed Modernity or Elusive Modernity? *Korea Europe Review*, No. 5, 2023, doi 000 000 000 000
6. Michael J. Seth: Chang Kyung-sup and The Logic of Compressed Modernity: A Review Article *Korea Europe Review*, No. 5, 2023, doi 000 000 000 000
7. Seth 2002.

compression as postcolonial nation's capitalist political economic exigency – is structurally and comparatively discussed between India vis-à-vis South Korea. It is thereby revealed that the variably lasting indicators of socioeconomic and industrial conditions in them do not refute the general salience of the postcolonial developmental – and increasingly neoliberal – systems of governance across Asia and elsewhere and that developmental compression, as the national(ist) collective framework of socioeconomic change, is a generic regime of (compressed) modernity whether in reality or aspiration. On the other hand, India, if characterized in respect to particular pockets of social and developmental distinctions, is simultaneously compressed modern, cosmomodern, postmodern, hypermodern, undermodern, heteromodern, postcolonial, as well as neotraditionalist.

In Yuriy Savelyev's essay, "Compressed Modernity or Elusive Modernity?"⁵, post-socialist Ukraine's dilemma, apart from its latest tragic subjection to the Russian military invasion, is addressed in terms of a sort of compressed demodernization. This flatly contradicts any validity of all the loud theory – more correctly, the arrogant liberal rhetoric – of the "big bang" (compressed) approach in abrupt systemic liberalization, supposedly constituted by democracy (namely, the termination of the Communist monopoly of state power), marketization and privatization (namely, the dissolving of the state and collective economic system), and individualized citizenship (re)establishment (in practice, nullification of politico-bureaucratically managed entitlements to work, housing, income guarantee, etc.). In a sort of varieties of post-socialism perspective, the Ukraine case is also particularized by its decolonial transition away from Russia's state socialist colonialism and experimental assimilation with Western Europe as a sort of regionally associative or transnationally integrative liberal modernity. In comparative perspective, it merits special attention that China's sustained developmental compression and accompanying societal transformations – despite the initial categorization of such changes as "gradual reform" – have recently been addressed in terms of compressed modernity by numerous Chinese and foreign scholars.

In Michael J. Seth's distinctly knowledgeable perspective⁶ both in historical and global/regional purview, it is emphasized that most structural properties of compressed modernity highlighted in the South Korean context are, in fact, quite generally observable in various other regions and eras and, by implication, that compressed modernity comprises a fundamentally universal civilizational and/or political economic construct in the modern world. By his other significant work on education⁷ – namely, the "education fever" in South Korea/East Asia – the educationalization of postcolonial (and neoliberal) modernity, or educationally compressed modernity and its sociopolitical conditions and consequences, seems to have critically influenced virtually all modern societies and their citizens, ultimately making it possible to ordinaly line them up according to formalized indicators of educational performance, a neoliberal reinforcement of which has recently become a globalized fetishism.

All these suggestions and implications from the panel reviewers' essays infallibly signify, and necessitate, that scholarship on compressed modernity, while substantially concentrated in my own work, has only elementarily been kicked off in particular reference to South Korea and its East Asian neighbors since the mid 20th century. No doubt, only a large intellectual community across the world can meaningfully cater to the full scientific contributory potential of transdisciplinary scholarship on compressed modernity.

Nonetheless, let me take the current opportunity to touch on a very fundamental, yet hitherto somewhat neglected, issue of social inequalities as structur-

ally embedded in or entangled with various crisis tendencies of the life world under compressed modernity. This analytical observation is flexibly building or elaborating on the above-mentioned suggestions and implications offered in the five review essays. Taken together, these essays explicitly or implicitly address various structural predicaments of (compressed) modernity due to its inherently asymmetrical purposes and dynamics between the system world of politics, economy, and organized professions and the life world (of grassroots citizens and communities). Relatedly, the following three issues deserve special attention:

[II]

8. Polanyi, 2002.

From England's enclosure movement to South Korea's state capitalist industrialization, industrial capitalism's dramatic take-off and sustained velocity have nearly necessitated fundamental threats, shocks, and destructions to the aged spatial foundations of the popular life worlds.⁸ Mass proletarianization has taken place in newly created and/or expanded urban areas, in which a process of hierarchically and/or discriminatorily reorganizing national socioeconomic spaces has taken effect mainly according to industrial capital's asymmetrically favored utilities, with new social necessities for the proletarian life world only reluctantly recognized or residually protected—often deceptively subordinating them to further interests of capital (in particular, real estate development, commercial housing construction, etc.).

In the long run, class inequalities in most successful (or most notably compressed) late industrialized economies have most conspicuously been manifested in terms of spatial fluidities, shortages, and defects of the proletarian life world—with a visible exception of the planned capital-intensive industrialization zones in which industrial productionism is effectively serviced by its workforce's most effective deployment in standardized blocks of apartments and townhouses.

A vast population of ex-proletarian self-employees in petty trade and personal service sectors of various informal characteristics end up struggling and, if any, surviving in the inherently make-shift spaces of living and working in mega urban peripheries, without being able to avoid or challenge predatory business interests and pressures for their repeated relocation and displacement. Their life world, if any, remains spatially transitory, fluid, and informal and thus incurs systematic exploitation under whatever commercial or governmental actions are taken for its regulatory and/or physical stabilization.

To current and ex-proletariat, urban space is both medium and outcome of their double class exploitation, which endlessly repeats itself through megalopolitan urban expansion in many supposedly successful societies of compressed industrial modernity.

[III]

Postcolonial liberal institutional(ist) modernization as instant nation-state framing of society and people has paradoxically been a highly centralized process frequently or chronically plagued with authoritarian political and/or bureaucratic suppressions of the life world's subjects, practices, and spaces. Furthermore, the Cold War order, especially when its local manifestations involved violent civil conflicts and armed battles, even rendered the nominally liberal political regimes to assume a totalitarian stance of assaulting the life world for any randomly suspected thoughts or acts of rebellion.

Ideationally, liberal intellectuals critical of such tyranny of the autocratic liberal rule—as well as progressive socialist intellectuals—have not been totally absent in any postcolonial society, but they also have comprised a centralized social force (of cultural celebrities to ordinary life world citizens) in their own way, given the significance of reflexive intellectual exposure to Western liberal (as well as radical) ideas as enabled mainly through domestic and/or Western institutions of higher learning.

Their critical or progressive liberalism, even when it manages to materialize into tangible political influence or, as in South Korea, even into elected state power, often manifests its own limits in organically enfranchising or representing grassroots identities and interests of the life world and thereby ends up helping to politically reinstate heirs of the autocratic era under the collusively normalized reproduction of populist politics enmeshed with politically fabricated class identities and interests. Under such actually observed conditions and practices, postcolonial liberal democracy has frequently and even systematically alienated and deprived ordinary life world citizens in basic sociopolitical citizenship, leading to their gross inequalities from elite urbanites in politico-administrative, business, professional, and academic sectors.

[IV]

Postcolonial development, whether aligned with US-led liberal internationalism or modelled after Stalinist state socialism, was a process of national(ist) developmental compression by which all elements, places, and subjects of the grassroots life world would be reconceived and reshuffled according to the abruptly and unilaterally superimposed criteria, rules, and directives of the newly established or West-derivatively reinstated state power and its domestic or foreign business allies. The subaltern socioeconomic, not to mention cultural, rationality embedded in the life world of indigenous people (such as Chayanovian peasantry⁹) is rarely incorporated into the centrally defined and regimented mobilization of social resources.

This developmental uprooting of the life world was by far the most serious in the process of Stalinist heavy industrialization under state socialism in which a majority of the concerned national populations ended up being compulsorily reorganized into production-aligned labor brigades. It did not take too many decades before the compressively amplified production goods-centered economic systems reached the common dead end of no obvious social utilities for the life world.

The instant system restructuring in radically liberal directions of the more industrialized socialist economies has not in any sense helped to reinstate or revitalize the long liquidated grassroots life world; whereas the industrially laggard socialist nations such as China and Vietnam have somehow managed to embark on a sort of industrialization from below.¹⁰ The latter group's majority peasant populations, having remained practically arrested through collective/state farms that roughly corresponded to their indigenous life world spaces or communities, began to flexibly exercise their newly won (or retrieved) social and managerial autonomy in most rational ways of resource allocation and needs satisfaction.

China and Vietnam in turn have continuously been envious of their industrialized capitalist neighbors in East Asia such as Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, whose developmental initiation and sustenance, in no incidence, were crucially preceded by the respectively effective land reforms, albeit under complicated and variegated conditions, that helped to reinstate and stabilize a sort of life world conditionalities of each majority peasant population. The so-called Lewisian

9. Chayanov, 1986.

10. Chang, 1993.

industrialization¹¹ predicated upon the stabilized life world of peasant families has thereby found its most prototypical incidents across East Asia and thus come to take on the honorable status of the sociohistorically most relevant economic theory.

11. Lewis, 1954.

[V]

The crisis of the life world has very long been debated as one of the most crucial agendas in social theory by numerous leading critics of modernity and late modernity¹² and, more broadly, by social scientists of diverse disciplines on modern development and social change. Compressed modernity, as has been theorized and analyzed by this author and as has been understood and applied by numerous scholars in diverse regions of the world, also needs to be seriously debated in respect to its effects and side-effects on the life world in any society exposed to or undergoing compressed modernity whether positively, negatively, or confusingly.¹³

12. See, above all, Habermas, 1975.

13. For instance, see Chapter 6 “Compressed Modernity, Familial(ized) Liberalism, and Authoritarian Life World” in my forthcoming book in 2024, *The Risk of Compressed Modernity*.

Broadly speaking, compressed modernity in innumerable societies has been debated, pursued, compelled, realized, radicalized, or distorted with formidable threats, shocks, distortions, and destructions to the indigenous and/or subaltern life world of grassroots citizens. As compressed modernity is often loudly celebrated in the system world as collective purpose or civilizational value, most of grassroots citizens in an ordinary postcolonial society would rather opt to develop or find its new benefits or opportunities in the normally superimposed systems of politics, economy, and society, while flexibly, if not fatalistically, adapting to the structural decline or displacement of their indigenous life world.

As analyzed above, however, various aspects and components of social inequalities accompanying compressed modernity have structurally been entangled with or embedded in the arbitrary subordination or unilateral destruction of their life world. Needless to say, regeneration, reinvigoration, or reinvention of the life world has been a key historical agenda among plenty of influential intellectuals and innumerable social activists and advocates across the world. However, such historical agenda does not seem to belong to the ordinary domain of conventional or mainstream social sciences, which are in fact defined mainly in terms of their scientific and/or pragmatic utilities for the system world. Perhaps, the nearly worldwide appeal of many recent masterpieces of South Korean popular culture and literature—for instance, the Oscar-winner, *The Parasite*—may have crucially derived from their admirably empathetic reflection on diverse life world predicaments of compressed modernity.

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