

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Compressed Modernity or Elusive Modernity?

Yuriy Savelyev

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine

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The publication of professor Chang's book *The Logic of Compressed Modernity* is reassuring for those researchers who are interested in studies of modern societies and modernization. These researchers may often feel discouraged for the concepts of modernization and modernity fell out of fashion in mainstream sociology and especially political science. However, both concepts are still in demand in many regions with so called "catching-up development" including post-communist Central and Eastern Europe¹ and China.²

Such a lasting interest is not at all surprising because many governments and academics in developing countries keep considering modernization as a way to economic prosperity, well-being and success in a global competition (Martinelli, He 2015). In particular, during the mid-2000s through the early 2010s then moderately authoritarian regimes in Russia and Ukraine craved for economic modernization but without any institutional changes associated with Western like democratic political systems which could undermine the rule of these regimes.

What they wanted was modernization to achieve economic growth and catch up with prosperous developed countries. Such a perspective was based on a vulgarized notion of modernization as a triad – economic growth, well-being, life satisfaction – in policy making as well as social sciences discourse. Economic growth normally enhances quality of life which in turn leads to higher life satisfaction within the population. Therefore, stability of political regimes is primarily grounded on the country's strong economic performance.³

Professor Chang's book persuasively shows how primitive and inadequate this notion is. The story of South Korea's modernity presents a compelling case especially for those who are familiar with the communist modernization project and its post-Soviet consequences as well as with various colonial and post-colonial modernities.

Once Samuel Huntington noted a striking similarity between economies of Ghana and South Korea in the early 1960s and their dramatic differences just 30 years later.⁴ I would emphasize another resemblance, namely between South Korea and Ukraine, which then was the part of the Soviet Union, in 1990. Both countries also had virtually identical levels of GDP per capita, roughly comparable structure of economy and manufacturing. Both societies went through democratic transition. But once again, South Korea propelled itself to becoming one of world's most innovative and prosperous economies while Ukraine (as it happened 30 years before with Ghana) was left far behind. In addition, Ukraine encountered a painful de-modernization after the collapse of the Soviet modernity.⁵ Even before the initial Russian aggression and illegal annexation of the Crimea in 2014 Ukraine failed to reach a value of GDP per capita which it used

Corresponding author

Yuriy Savelyev, D.Sc., C.Sc., Professor
Faculty of Sociology, Taras Shevchenko National
University of Kyiv
60 Volodymyrska St.
Kyiv 01601, Ukraine
Tel: +38 068 3992703
Email:yursave[at]knu.ua

1. Rabušić, Chromková 2020; Savelyev 2016.
2. Martinelli, He 2015.
3. Savelyev 2020.
4. Harrison, Huntington, 2000.
5. Savelyev 2018.
6. Diamond, 1997.
7. Bauman 2000; Berger 1990; Wagner 1994, Eisenstadt 2010.
8. Chang 2022.
9. Chang 2022, 20.
10. Wittrock 2000, 36.
11. Chang 2022, 78.
12. Therborn 2003, 294.
13. Bauman 2000, 28.

to have in 1990 and which turned out to be the highest in its history.

It would be a happiest dream for many people in Ukraine if their country could be at least half as successful as South Korea during the last three decades. I believe that this feeling might be rightful for people in numerous developing countries.

That is why, when reading about a myriad of predicaments related to South Korea's modernity, I could not help recalling the opening sentence from Leo Tolstoy's novel: All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. This famous expression inspired the formulation of the so called Anna Karenina principle, according to which even a single possible deficiency is going to undermine success of any endeavour or a process.⁶ Upon reading the book on compressed modernity one could extend this principle and conclude that each modern society is unhappy and it is unhappy in its own way.

It is true that despite all obvious gains, modernity is disappointing. But is it supposed to bring satisfaction and universal well-being? An important and desirable consequence of modernization is the increase of quality of life based on a higher economic efficiency and competitiveness. However, these advantages come at a cost of numerous antinomies and implicit tensions.⁷ Quite often researchers and especially policy-makers tend to overlook them.

Alternatively, scholars seek for an ideal type of modernity and modernization. When, as it usually happens, the reality does not correspond to the theoretical constructs, they start developing a more elaborate typology. Reading the book one can find in addition to the concepts of "compressed modernity" and "post-compressed modern condition" other notions of "postcolonial neo-traditionalist modernity", "neo-colonial reflexive modernization", "reflexive institutional(ist) modernity", "state capitalist modernity", "neoliberal global modernity", "subaltern liberal modernity", etc.⁸

All these types of modernity are by default contrasted with some kind of a genuine "Western modernity" and "the [collective] West" which "stands not only as a discrete region but also as a discrete... moment of history".⁹ This is, of course, an outer "non-Western" vision. So called 'Western modernity' is no less intrinsically diverse as any other local modernity. As Björn Wittrock pointed out, an ideal type modernity "in terms of the prevalence of a few key societal institutions" hardly ever existed, having "a very short history, even in the European context".¹⁰

I have no doubt about the validity of the book's conclusion that "[g]iven its internal multiple modernities, South Korea often appears to be a kind of multiplex society subjected to diverse yet coexisting regimes of modernization".¹¹ But so do many other societies all over the world.

An observed multiplicity in South Korea and elsewhere manifests an elusive and ever changing character of modernity. It may be very different in local varieties or can be shaped in a peculiar blend. Nevertheless, in its core it always has "a particular time orientation... looking forward to this worldly future, open, novel... seeing the present as a possible preparation for a future, and the past either as something to leave behind or as a heap of ruins, pieces of which might be used for building a new future".¹² What makes society modern and what separates modernity from pre-modern forms of social organization is compulsive, obsessive, continuous, permanent, forever incomplete modernization.¹³

The latter can unfold in many specific ways with different agents involved. In the case of South Korea "the developmental state" played a crucial role. Chang rightly maintains that "[i]n South Korea (and other East Asian societies), modernity was conceived in a fundamentally developmentalist or productionist manner, so modernization principally became the politico-social project of achiev-

14. Chang 2022, 138-139.

15. Eisenstadt 1992; Sztompka 1993.

16. Chang 2022, 106.

17. More 2012 [1516], 42-44.

ing time-condensed economic development and thereby becoming an ‘advanced nation’... as swiftly as possible”.¹⁴ A similar societal project was earlier implemented in the Soviet Union and several Central and East European countries of the socialist block. Such a specific type of expeditious development was defined as a “forced” or “imposed” modernization “from above”.¹⁵

Thus, this is not just a unique experience of South Korea or East Asia. Any “modernity is transformative” in its essence even if in some societies “the transformation-embedded interests” become “the core social identity”.¹⁶ Sometimes, the state or a political party, as it happened during the communist project of a forced modernization, can adopt “impulsive, excessive, and violent manners of pursuing the transformations”, which, according to Chang, also deeply traumatized South Korean society. However, victims of modernity (or in Chang’s words “transformative victims”) are common and unavoidable since the early modern era. The 21st century book on the logic of compressed modernity continues the five hundred years old sentiment articulated by Sir Thomas More when he reflected the consequences of enclosure in England and famously wrote “sheep... to devour men and unpeople, not only villages, but towns”.¹⁷

Paraphrasing Leo Tolstoy again: all pre-modern societies were alike being locked in their tradition; each modern society is different in its own way of modernity. Yet, all of them have to deal with its repercussions as well as make use of its benefits.

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Author details

Yuriy Savelyev, D.Sc. (Dr. habil. in Sociology) is originally from the eastern part of Ukraine which has been occupied by the Russian Federation since 2014. Currently he is Professor of Sociology at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. The scope of his comparative research includes social change and modernization, social agents' values, capabilities, participation and inclusion in European societies. He received the Merit Award of the Worldwide Competition for junior scholars from the International Sociological Association (ISA) in 2006 and was a Carnegie Research Fellow at Boston College in 2011. He has over 70 publications in international and Ukrainian academic journals including *International Sociology*, *Ideology and Politics*, *Sociológia*, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, *Thesis Eleven*, *Europe-Asia Studies* and *Ukrainian Society*.