The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future

by Prasenjit Duara, Director Asia Research Institute
The Crisis of Global Modernity
Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future

PRASENJIT DUARA

• One of the world’s leading historians compares and contrasts long-term historical processes in the West and Asia.
• Draws on transcendent Asian traditions to seek new answers to the global crisis of environmental sustainability.
• Proposes a new paradigm and narrative for ‘sustainable modernity’.

In this major new study, Prasenjit Duara expands his influential theoretical framework to present circulatory, transnational histories as an alternative to nationalist history. Duara argues that the present day is defined by the intersection of three global changes: the rise of non-Western powers, the crisis of environmental sustainability, and the loss of authoritative sources of what he terms transcendent – the ideals, principles and ethics once found in religions or political ideologies. The physical salvation of the world is becoming – and must become – the transcendent goal of our times, but this goal must transcend national sovereignty if it is to succeed. Duara suggests that a viable foundation for sustainability might be found in the traditions of Asia, which offer different ways of understanding the relationship between the personal, ecological and universal. These traditions must be understood through the ways they have circulated and converged with contemporary developments.

Hardback | 978-1-107-08225-0 | £55.00
Paperback | 978-1-107-44285-6 | £21.99
Forthcoming, December 2014

www.cambridge.org
The crisis of global modernity has been produced by human overreach that has been founded on a paradigm of national modernization. If rising Asian nations such as China and India were to strive for the same modes and levels of production and consumption that have historically prevailed in the West, our planet will surely be environmentally ravaged and all forms of life, including human, will be severely threatened. Indeed, most environmental scientists believe that we are already living in the Anthropocene when human activity has almost irreversibly shaped the fate of the planet more than any other force. This work of historical sociology considers alternative approaches and resources in Asian traditions—particularly of China and India— that Max Weber had found wanting in their capacity to achieve modernity.

I develop two kinds of historical arguments and a conceptual-methodological one to understand the problem. I trace the specific type of community formation, viz, the confessional nation that became the vehicle of capitalist competitiveness in Europe after the 16th-17th centuries, and subsequently, in the rest of the world. This kind of imperialist and national competition for natural and global resources was enabled by the confessional idea of a ‘chosen people’ who were privileged over other beings as much as by the ‘disenchantment’ of the world where there were no supernatural or sacred forces restraining the exploitation of nature.

The taken-for-granted nature of the modernizing nation was secured by their tunneled, linear histories which obscured the actual histories of circulatory and interdependent forces that shaped these societies. This argument suggests that histories are not principally linear and cannot justify arguments of national sovereignty; histories are circulatory and part of a collective heritage. Even while the historical record of per-capita emission and consumption levels of different societies cannot be ignored, theories of sovereignty must begin from this understanding.

The second argument represents recent and contemporary history. I explore groups, organizations, networks and vulnerable communities in Asia as well as allied forces across the globe--- NGOS, inter-govermenttal and trans-national organizations, scientists, religious groups, publicists and other activists— who are making an effort to bring the issues of climate change, resource conservation and responsible use of the commons to global awareness. By raising the profile of circulatory histories to their true role and identifying those groups and networks who are still —or have more recently become— committed to the inviolability or sacrality of the commons, we can try to overcome the disastrous consequences of national sovereignty paradigm and collectively tackle the crisis of an unsustainable planet.

Finally, from a methodological perspective, I develop various concepts in the book such as circulatory histories, dialogical versus radical transcendence, the ‘traffic’ between the religious and the secular and others, to develop a paradigm that may serve as an alternative to modernization theory. Geo-engineering of the environment is unlikely to yield the answers perhaps because each application also yields unknown problems; we will need to affect human behavior at the level of individual and societal desires and identities. I call the new paradigm, ‘sustainable modernity’ and it embeds a set of values that could shape research agendas in the humanities and social science disciplines and also entails collaboration with scientists imbued with the goals of sustainability.
APPENDIX II: Endorsements for Crisis of Global Modernity

Modernity in its Western guise has generated a degraded, unsustainable world. To find the basis for a more viable, 'post-Western modernity,' Duara maintains, we must look beyond this tradition. Drawing on a capacious command of Asian history and society, Duara probes the region’s older philosophies to offer a vision that might nurture a truly global commons. This is work that is ambitious in the best possible sense.’

JEAN COMAROFF, Harvard University

‘Duara’s opus is both timely and important. By re-vitalizing ancient Asian traditions which also emphasize sustainability, we can develop a stronger global consensus to protect our global commons. Duara’s magnificent book will do the world a great service.'

KISHORE MABHUBANI, National University of Singapore

Incisive and inspiring… Duara draws on his deep knowledge of China and other Asian philosophical traditions. He locates rich dialogical resources for alternative modes of human flourishing. This book is a profound challenge to received models of modernity.'

KENNETH DEAN, McGill University.

‘Ranging across history, religion, politics, and ethics as they have appeared in multiple traditions, Duara draws out implications of our now-global quest for “modernity” and “development” for environmental sustainability. This is a provocative intervention in some of the most fundamental issues of our times.'

KENNETH POMERANZ, University of Chicago

‘The intersection of the personal, the ecological, and the universal is a key vector in Prasenjit Duara's disentangling of what it will take to achieve the "physical salvation" of our world. This is a brilliant text; it contributes to the methodological understanding of our period.'

SASKIA SASSEN, Columbia University, author of Expulsions

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The full access can be accessed via