

Resetting Modernity in Different Countries: An Exercise in Philosophical Diplomacy, Europe x China

BRUNO LATOUR

Professor, Sciences Po, Paris and the AIME team

It is clear that there is a contradiction between the goal of universal development associated with modernization and what could now be called the state of the planet. Earth scientists have recently developed the notion of Anthropocene, referring to a new era of history in which humans are regarded as a geological force, able to durably modify Earth's ecology; though it remains controversial, it offers a convenient word to designate the tension between human development and the material world. In a way, such disputation complements the obvious stratification in the distribution of wealth that has organized political thought since the birth of socialism. Together the two contradictions define the range of political positions that citizens in every country grapple with today.

Although this second contradiction has been ignored, played down, rejected and denied, it was made explicit in December 2015, at the conclusion of COP 21 in Paris¹. On this occasion, all countries agreed to limit their use of fossil fuels, but dually realized that their respective projects of development could not be accommodated within the narrowing limitations defined by Earth and climate scientists. As well as being unequivocal about the question of CO₂ release and its impact on climate, the final treaty also declared an official state of emergency that none of the nations therein assembled could continue to ignore. But of course, the declaration did not mean that they were ready to tackle the problem effectively—far from it. The assembled parties recognized that for any political assembly the problem was, so to speak, “the elephant in the room.” It could be denied, but not ignored.

Realizing the social question regarding universal development associated with modernization—the first contradiction tackled by socialism—is being conflated by the ecological paradox as well, the two together making it even more difficult to agree on political positions. Modernization does not have a material world within

¹ The 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP 21 or CMP 11 was held in Paris, France, from 30 November to 12 December 2015.

which to continue. Hence, the necessity of doing what we call a “reset” of the goals and directions of modernity.

What is a reset? A reset in practical terms is a set of procedures by which we render our instruments (such as telephones, scales, and cameras) sensitive to the input of data. It is often used in science and technology as an equivalent to “starting again” or even “rebooting.” A reset is not a revolution or a *tabula rasa*; the process implies a specific set of procedures to recalibrate an instrument such as a compass, which has lost its ability to provide an accurate indication of where we are. Metaphorically, a reset is what makes our conceptual and emotional bodily equipment sensitive to a new situation.

It is clear that since every nation is faced with the contradiction between modernization and the state of the planet, all of them are also interested in a resetting of its modernizing project. Therefore the possibility exists of comparing how different nations cope with a similar situation. The comparison is even more interesting since historically, every country has reacted differently to the concept of modernity. In spite of its apparent universality, there is nothing more historically contingent than the complex and varied cultural entanglements with what is now called “globalization.” In a way, nothing is less “global” than globalization.

How do we compare these various entangled histories? One-way is to consider how Europe has coped with modernization since the beginning of the movement in the 16th and 17th centuries. The AIME project has tried to do this by launching what can be called anthropology of the moderns. It started 30 years ago and resulted in two books: *We have never been modern* (1991)² and *An inquiry into modes of existence* (2012)³. Within this framework modernism cannot be unquestionably defined as the progress of history, but a puzzling and momentary movement that has to be studied empirically in all its diversities and contradictions. The main illogicality that has been discovered in such a study is that “we,” that is the Europeans, have “never” been modern. What this means is that modernity should not be promoted or criticized, but that ultimately it is not achievable, since there is no way for a “modern

² Latour, Bruno, and Catherine Porter. *We have never been modern*. Estados Unidos: Harvard U, 1991. Print.

³ Latour, Bruno. *An inquiry into modes of existence: an anthropology of the moderns*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 2013. Print.

world” to find durable conditions for existence on earth. Modernism – to use a religious expression – is literally, not of this earth.

It is this set of contradictions that the AIME team has decided to render more precise. An exhibit in 2016 at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, allowed the group to launch the idea of such a comparison by offering a Europe-based version of the reset, through six procedures summarized in a catalog published that same year by MIT Press. Those procedures asked visitors to revisit their conception of globalization, science, technology, and the notion of territory, but also that of religion and politics. The reason for these particular topics is that – at least in Europe – they are all bound with the notion of “being modern.” Every time an effort has been made to expand the modernizing frontier, changes in the way science, technology, politics and religion are understood, has also occurred. However, the most important change concerns what happens to the notion of territory.

Our exhibition was a first attempt at stating how Europeans, by resetting their conceptions of modernity, could be rendered sensitive to the contradiction that the notion of modernity itself had never been clearly defined. At the completion of the exhibition, the AIME team became convinced that such a notion of resetting could offer a productive protocol for comparing its results with parallel initiatives in other countries.

But with which country should we begin the complex task of establishing a comparison? Starting with China was an obvious choice. More than any other country, China is simultaneously the most deeply engaged in rapid modernization, while also being the most explicitly aware of the contradiction between this project and its material and physical basis. While in other countries this contradiction can still be ignored or denied, it is official policy in China to recognize such an incongruence and to tackle it head on. What makes China an ideal first case is also that such a contradiction is clearly connected with the aforementioned paradox associated with socialism. A link between the two contradictions is thus made explicit in China, a connection that is not always made in other countries.

This is why we agreed to participate in the Shanghai Project, an interdisciplinary event taking as its topic the future of the world in a hundred years. Though it appears to be a project very foreign to our earlier goals, in practice the link between our objective and the Shanghai Project is not so far fetched: if there is one thing we can

be sure of, it is that in a hundred years the contradictions mentioned above will have been resolved, either through the total destruction of all protagonists or through some rather miraculous metamorphosis of the present situation. What city would be better suited to imagine these various apocalyptic scenarios than Shanghai?

This is why, thanks to Shanghai Project, it is with China that we wish to activate our first encounter, in order to compare different versions of how to reset modernity and also to test the feasibility of our protocol.

So how are we to proceed? Through a series of workshops designed to utilize documentation specifically assembled for discussion. Why do we stress the importance of documentation? Because we do not wish to merely discuss ideas or worldviews. It is commonly believed that such levels of abstraction will produce nothing more than the usual clichés about the contrasts between Eastern and Western schools of thought. Additionally, such discussions are most often predicated on a completely inaccurate view of what modernity has been—precisely the view that the AIME project has been relentlessly criticizing.

It is because modernity is not achievable in practice that it is very difficult for other cultures to establish a related level playing field. You first have to transform modernity from an ideal into a mundane and complex reality, through some sort of reset. The comparison becomes rewarding only if the two parties are resetting modernity on their own terms and in parallel.

In our experience, the only way to apply our protocol effectively is to start not with ideas, but with documents. By documents we mean texts, articles, works of arts, iconic artifacts, films, narratives, depositions, and so on. The discussion around documents allows for a much more lively and less predictable outcome than when only ideas are being presented.

The way we wish to proceed similarly twins diplomatic encounters: two parties explore each other's interests and intentions, while remaining partially in the dark about their counterpart's customs and manners. We are imagining a semi-fictional situation in which a European delegation would begin by offering its version of how it has reset the modernizing impulse, followed by a reply from a Chinese delegation, and so forth. Such a protocol is especially necessary in the case of a Europe-China encounter, given the well-known incommensurability in language, history and

culture. But for us, such incomparable states are not a disadvantage, but in fact are what renders the diplomatic encounter so interesting. The occupation of a common world is not a precondition for launching such an encounter, but only one of its possible conclusions.

However, agreement is not the only target. Our goal is rather to trigger enough interest amongst the fictitious Chinese delegation that they begin to build their own version of a project to reset modernity, with their own procedures and documentation. Given the completely different histories of modernization in Europe and China, it would be absurd to expect any similarity in the conclusions. The precise aim of a reset is to register more differences, precisely those differences that the naive notion of a universal project of globalization has erased, or at least blunted in the first place.

To focus such a diplomatic encounter we propose to start around the recent transformations of three basic components of identity in the modern world. First, we must precisely establish the particular place we reside; followed by specifying the period within which we live. Finally and most importantly: who are “we,” which is to say, what types of historical agents are contemporary humans meant to behave as? This final question may likely be the most difficult question of them all. In classical terms, the question of where, when and who could be a starting point for discussion.

Where? The consequence of having the Earth react more quickly and violently to the weight and extent of modernization is very troubling. Until now, humans considered nature as a more or less stable stage on which they could be the actors, but today it is the stage itself that has become part of the action. The result? New definitions have formed regarding conceptions of land, territory, and borders, and a complete redefinition of the very idea of the sovereignty exerted by nation-states on a stable piece of land. While the historical definition of sovereignty around the notion of the State has been established in geopolitical terms, progressively, a conflicting movement is dissolving such boundaries and imposing other geopolitics, this time based on a more concrete definition of geography and geology. It will be immensely interesting to see how participating delegations at future negotiations react to this change in the definition of the lands they inhabit.

When? While modernization supposed an era of continuous emancipation and development towards which all nations would finally converge, it is now clear that

humans are asked to behave as if they were living in a *new epoch*, what some would call the Anthropocene, which has a very different trajectory and horizon. It is hard to see where older ideas of progress are leading. To place oneself in a historical period, such as the Renaissance or Modernity, and to place other cultures in relation to your own, such as in the Middle Ages, has been a key component of European identity. But how are we to define the time in which one lives if it is a geo-historical period (the Anthropocene) that measures the passing of time? That definition is especially difficult since it is also associated with another level of responsibility; the agent of history is not the same. To live in the modern period is not the same as to live in the Anthropocene.

Who? Such disorientation in time and space has an even more troubling consequence for the definitions of human actors, who during the modernizing period have taken themselves to be the only “agents” in history. Now that the Earth reacts so dramatically to human action it is no longer clear who is doing the acting and how humans, either individually or in groups, should behave. Moreover, whose interests they should represent and prefer is increasingly ambiguous. Actually, it is not even clear whether they should define themselves as “humans.” At a time when actors are offered a momentous role in responding to the planet's reactions, they seem to lose their collective ability to deal with such changes. On the one hand, they are given a unique opportunity to shape the history of the Earth, but contrarily they are reduced to a geological phenomenon against which they no longer have any traction.

Exploring common disorientations in time, space and agency is of course distressing for all those who believe in modernization, but it is also a great opportunity for humans who are ready to reassess and to reset the original goal of modernity. We must focus on the various conceptions of science: how the notion of territory and sovereignty are understood, and how to handle the role of technology and religion.

The idea is to initiate a discussion by first asking a European delegation to present how they will go about resetting their view of modernity. A corresponding workshop would then allow a Chinese party to “test” the European propositions as extensively as possible. It is obvious that the formulations offered by the European party are not likely to make much sense within a Chinese context. Hence the complex process of translating and negotiating impending differences. If we succeed in starting such a process then the Chinese participants would bring many

other documents, examples, sites, situations and concepts to bear, thus producing a different view of what constitutes modernity.

The purpose of these workshops would be to archive this process of reassessment in order to compare how European and Chinese thinkers, artists, intellectuals, activists and officials could handle new situations. Our goal is to profit from the formidable trial of the ecological mutations confronting us, by comparing how two cultures would react and reassess their own trajectories of modernization. Two highly complex civilizations confronted first by the shock of various modernizations and then more recently to the enormous counter shock of the new climatic regime, offers an ideal situation for productive encounters. We thank the Shanghai Project for allowing this first test of our protocol to move forward.