Late Modernity from the Perspective of Girls' Education

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EDITORIAL

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Late Modernity is one of those imprecise concertina concepts like postmodernity or indeed modernity itself that expands to fill the theoretical void. These concepts are very broad historical categories that point out significant trends or tendencies. Late modernity as a concept signals the continuation of modernity as societies become global societies marked by global capitalism and the information revolution. Modernity as a period concept suggests a move away from traditional agrarian societies toward industrial societies characterized by increasing secularization and rationalization within the development of nation states. Early modernity is often conceived as the period from 1500 to the birth of the French Revolution in 1789. Classical modernity is synonymous with the so-called long nineteenth century, from 1789 to 1900, and late modernity follows on to roughly 1989 with the collapse of the East/West divide and the end of the cold war. Thereafter, various theorists have drawn on the developments of information and communication technologies and the growth of forms of mass and social media to talk of postmodernity, or at least the first signs of a nonpolar global interconnected space no longer dominated by the West. This latest phase of globalization is hypothesized on the integration of the world economy, with China joining the WTO in 2001, the demise of the West, and the rise of the BRICs countries.

Haast (2008) has recently described twenty-first century international relations in terms of nonpolarity, meaning 'a world dominated not by one or two or even several states but rather by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power.' He hypothesizes a series of stages, with the twentieth century beginning as multipolar, followed by a bipolar system. With the demise of the Soviet Union, he talks of the emergence of a unipolar international system dominated by one power, which is finally giving way to the onset of nonpolarity and a system where power is diffused. He goes on to explain:

> Today's world differs in a fundamental way from one of classic multipolarity: there are many more power centers, and quite a few of these poles are not nation-states. Indeed, one of the cardinal features of the contemporary international system is that nation-states have lost their monopoly on power and in some domains their preeminence as well. States are being challenged from above, by regional and global organizations; from below, by militias; and from the side, by a variety of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and corporations. Power is now found in many hands and in many places.[1]

The rise of 'non-state actors'—terrorists, global corporations, religious and ethnic tribes, sovereign wealth funds and nonprofit charities and foundations, European Union, 'civil society' foundations, and academic institutions—is now crucial in shaping the order of a 'nonpolar' world. Both the Internet and floods of global capital have decentralized and decentered the system of international relations, increasingly signaling a conglomeration of aligned interests that come into conflicts in the world's trouble spots, e.g. Syria, Gaza, Ukraine, and Nigeria.

The critique of modernization = westernization has now changed from the old imperialist and postwar neo-imperialist claims concerning global development to a critique of those 'non-state actors', in many parts of the world, who do not seek to substitute a socialist alternative but rather are inherently fundamentalist and religious and seek to preserve conservative values. In many cases, this means an active attack upon 'Western values' as degenerate, materialist, secular, and lacking spiritual purity. Much anti-western sentiment is directed by the Muslim world against the West today because of what is perceived as a campaign against Islam in the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan (Peters, 2005; Peters & Besley, 2014; Pieterse & Peters, 2012). This anti-western sentiment is expressed in moral terms as a critique of the increasing consumer culture, the increasing secularization, and the alleged consequent decline of morality and cultural traditionalism that centrally concerns the status of women and girls in society.

The stakes are very high for girls and young women. Women and their children are increasingly the ones who suffer most in attacks on civil society in terms of rape and violence as a deliberate strategy. Increasingly, also girls and young women are the target of war policies designed to prevent westernization through education and global social media. One example is the Boko Haram in Nigeria, which aims to prohibit all forms of western education because it is seen to conflict with Islam's basic teachings. As a consequence, the group has stepped up its gender-based violence (Peters, 2013; Pieterse & Peters, 2012).

One aspect is clear. The emancipation of women, the women's movement, women's education, and the gender reform movement have been a deep and transformative force that has globally hastened greater equality, job parity, and relinquishment of traditional attitudes and values that have repressed women and girls for centuries. The effects so far have been largely confined to the West, yet they are in the process of being released in non-western countries, especially those where patriarchy is strong and women's rights are weak. Arnot (2007) recapitulates the experience of England:

> Historical analysis of the gender reform movement exposes the complex interface between economic and political structures, macro and micro educational structures and processes and cultural movements, and the nuanced engagements between social class, ethnicity and gender inequalities.

She writes of the 'so-called 'modernising' of gender relations as one of the major leitmotifs of twentieth century England' (Arnot, 2007, p. 207). She tracks the growth of feminism in the social democratic era of the 1960s and 1970s developing out of the civil rights era, education feminism under managerialism and the new right during the 1980s and 1990s, and New Labor thereafter.

Baker (2005) addresses 'The Politics of Choice' under a neoliberal globalization as it applies to girls and young women:

> This historical period is unique and significant because of the unprecedented options now available to many girls and young women. It is important, then, to discover what kinds of social and biographical effects these changes have brought. The neo-liberal focus on choice and the individualisation and globalisation of society are key elements of recent social change which are particularly pertinent to young women. Theories of 'late modernity' conceptualise them as newly entitled to reflexively engage with the conditions of their lives (Beck, 1992, 2002; Giddens, 1991, 1992). Not only are they perceived as having been freed from previously constraining social and economic structures and values, they are positioned as exemplars for and metaphors of individually driven success in the new meritocracy (McRobbie, 2001). If, as cultural theorists such as Angela McRobbie have suggested, competitive individualism is now the mark of modern young womanhood (2000, 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c), then perhaps this is not an unproblematic transformation.

There is no reason to expect that non-western countries will emulate or follow the experience of England, or indeed the West more generally, but the effects of the idea of gender equality has become an irreversible tide.

The Global Gender Gap Report 2013[2] developed in 2006 by the World Economic Forum benchmarks national gender gaps of 136 countries on economic, political, education, and health-based criteria to help track a country's progress over time.[3] The report examines the gap between men and women in four fundamental categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. The Nordic countries have consistently held the top positions. No country has yet achieved gender equality, yet even the lowest ranked country—Yemen—has made some progress. The report ends with the message:

> This *Report* highlights the message to policy-makers that, in order to maximize competitiveness and development potential, each country should strive for gender equality—that is, should give women the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities as men. (p. 36)

This benchmarking study makes the right moves but does not explicitly recognize or theorize the myriad ways in which the political rights for women and girls and the building of effective political institutions are inseparable from economic rights and from participation in the economy. The combination of these elements has the capacity to challenge and change traditional society. To equalize rights often means to equalize employment and participation in the workforce, with the huge change in gender power relations that entails. Yet, the implementation of these theories on a global scale does not automatically guarantee new rights or even better lives.

Seguino (2006) puts the arguments with reference to women in Latin America and the Caribbean:

> Proponents of globalization have argued that economic growth, facilitated by policies to liberalize investment, trade, and financial flows as well as to privatize industry and reduce public sector deficits, will have a differentially beneficial effect on gender equality. Competitive pressures in a globalized economy, it is argued, make women an attractive source of labor, given their relatively lower wages …. Critics of globalization have argued that women are often disadvantaged in an economic process founded on liberalized trade, investment, and financial flows. This is related to the fact that the state's role is often attenuated under such a policy regime, in part because the mobility of capital puts downward pressure on public spending, making it difficult to fund social spending and safety nets. Further, there is evidence that employment is increasingly insecure, and women are often slotted for the jobs with the least security.[4] (p. 1)

Her conclusion 'Economic growth under liberalized conditions appears to have contradictory, and in some cases, worryingly negative gender effects' (p. 23) acts as a data-driven skepticism. If modernization is taken to mean globalization, then the picture is certainly not unambiguous. Globalization has contradictory effects on gender equalization and reform, often leaving women worse off than under traditional society.

In *Breaking Barriers: Gender Perspectives and Empowerment of Women in Least Developed Countries* (2006), the UN-OHRLLS[5] outlines the case for change in the least developed states:

> Gender inequality has serious social, political, and economic implications. Women are particularly disadvantaged and, as they account for half of the world's population, the consequences are grave both individually and cumulatively for nations. The plight of women in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) is particularly dire as they are commonly marginalized in societies that are already overwhelmed by poverty, underdevelopment and frequent unstable security conditions. Consequently, in conflicts, economic shocks or natural disasters, women are exposed to specific dangers to their person, their children, and their livelihoods. (p. vi)

This is a particularly relevant statement in the current mayhem of international relations of a nonpolar world where the West is declining in its ability to intervene in conflict zones. As Visalli (2014) reports referring to the Human Rights Watch,

> the situation for women in Afghanistan is 'dismal in every area,' with violence against them 'endemic' and a government that fails to protect them from crimes such as rape and murder.[3] The report cites cases where rapists have been pardoned by the government, girls and women have been imprisoned for running away from home, rape victims have been charged with adultery and where women in public life have been murdered. http://www.globalresearch.ca/womens-rights-in-war-torn-afghanistan-pervasive-poverty-oppression-and-abuse/5375124

And she continues:

> As disturbing as this news is, the oppression of and violence towards women in Afghanistan is in no way unique. While researching their book Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide, Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn discovered what they called a 'pandemic' of abuse of females by men around the world. To begin with, in China, India and elsewhere female fetuses are regularly aborted in favor of male babies; demographers say that more than 100 million females are 'missing' from the world due to what they call 'gendercide.' Once born, the British medical journal The Lancelet estimates that among the very poor of the world 1 million children are forced into prostitution every year, and the total number of prostituted children could be as high as 10 million. 130 million women alive today have endured genital mutilation, the cutting out of portions of their reproductive system, in order to destroy any sexuality. (ibid.)

One report suggests, 'Syrian women and girls are growing more vulnerable to sexual exploitation in Lebanon as their exile drags out and poverty increases'[6]; another suggests that 'The al-Qaeda-Inspired Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has ordered all girls and women between the ages of 11 and 46 in and around Iraq's northern city of Mosul to undergo female genital mutilation.'[7] More than 145,000 of the roughly half a million Syrian refugee families displaced since the war began in 2011 have a single woman as decision-maker and provider.[8] One headline, from *The Economist* (2010, March 4), calls out 'The war on baby girls: Gendercide' with the following 'Killed, aborted or neglected, at least 100 m girls have disappeared—and the number is rising.'[9]

> It is no exaggeration to call this gendercide. Women are missing in their millions—aborted, killed, neglected to death. In 1990, an Indian economist, Amartya Sen, put the number at 100 m; the toll is higher now …

> Baby girls are thus victims of a malign combination of ancient prejudice and modern preferences for small families …

> … all countries need to raise the value of girls. They should encourage female education; abolish laws and customs that prevent daughters inheriting property; make examples of hospitals and clinics with impossible sex ratios; get women engaged in public life—using everything from television newsreaders to women traffic police. Mao Zedong said 'women hold up half the sky.' The world needs to do more to prevent a gendercide that will have the sky crashing down.

The relations between modernity and war, and its impacts on women and children, require much more consideration and research, and the application of the educational mode of development (Peters, 2013; Peters, Besley, & Araya, 2013) with a strong gender focus.

Abu-Rabia-Queder (2006) writes of the tensions 'Between tradition and modernization' in trying to understand the problem of female Bedouin dropouts:

> Modernization movements and efforts, especially those aimed at improving women's status, have occupied a central place in the political discourse of the Middle East and other non-western countries since the nineteenth century. A great symbol of modernization has been advocacy of women's greater participation in both the public sphere—through education, employment and un-veiling—and in the political arena. In her book on gender and social change in the Middle East, Valentine Moghadam explains why she focuses on women: 'It's my contention that middle-class women in the Middle East are consciously major agents of social change in the region, at the vanguard of the movement to modernity'. (1993, p. xiii)

Moghadam (2005) is interested in transnational feminist networks and their effects on civil society and citizenship, and especially women's employment in the Middle East. Her focus on globalization is an extension of her article on modernizing women (Moghadam, 1993).

If globalization, as a form of modernization, brings mixed results for women and for gender equality, it is also clear that there are contradictions and paradoxes that operate. Nilsson's (2004) study of girls in the Punjab shows that tradition and traditional attitudes toward women survive the forces of modernization. Her study

> demonstrated that modernity, when seen from a gendered perspective generates processes and results that favour men, not women. It [is] also argued that India is in a transition period, between the traditional and modern India, where old norms and expectations clash with modern ideas. The paradox of modernity was illustrated by the phenomenon of sex selection favouring sons over daughters at birth. With the purpose of examining attitudes towards son preference among urban middle class youth, the study has highlighted a situation in which modern and traditional views coexist in a sometimes paradoxical and contradictory manner. (abstract)

This same skeptical attitude to an either/or dualism—modernity or traditionalism—is wrong-headed and the reality is much more complicated. For instance, Bano (2010) investigates the growth of female madrasas in Pakistan as a response to modernity, to show that this form of Islamic education for young women is regarded as complementary rather than a substitute for secular education and one that enhances the girl's marriage prospects. Moreover, 'religion is not a monolithic institution that is inherently supportive of obstructive development processes instead it can be seen as an informal institution on which people rely when formal institutions fail to provide the means to cope with day-to-day uncertainties' and as such the choice of *madrasa* education by parents is considered 'also a rational response to the socio-economic and cultural changes that concern them' (p. 2).

At the same time as recognizing this complexity, it is important to monitor developments in the West that indicate that the West does not necessarily provide the world barometer of social change and development. Looking back over the history of the

women's movement in the US, Coontz (2013) reminds us of the recent past and also why gender equality has stalled:

> In 1963, most Americans did not yet believe that gender equality was possible or even desirable. Conventional wisdom held that a woman could not pursue a career and still be a fulfilled wife or successful mother....

> Over the next 30 years this emphasis on equalizing gender roles at home as well as at work produced a revolutionary transformation in Americans' attitudes.

> But during the second half of the 1990s and first few years of the 2000s, the equality revolution seemed to stall. Between 1994 and 2004, the percentage of Americans preferring the male breadwinner/female homemaker family model actually rose to 40 percent from 34 percent. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of full-time working mothers who said they would prefer to work part time increased to 60 percent from 48 percent. In 1997, a quarter of stay-at-home mothers said full-time work would be ideal. By 2007, only 16 percent of stay-at-home mothers wanted to work full time....

> Today the main barriers to further progress toward gender equity no longer lie in people's personal attitudes and relationships. Instead, structural impediments prevent people from acting on their egalitarian values, forcing men and women into personal accommodations and rationalizations that do not reflect their preferences. The gender revolution is not in a stall. It has hit a wall.[10]

Yet, as Coontz (2013) comments, in the period after 1990, other western nations have actively pursued an agenda of 'work-family reconciliation.' Most countries offer paid leave to new mothers and some offer similar provisions for fathers, but the US offers nothing in this regard and its work–family provisions rank last in the list of countries of similar economic and political development. She concludes:

> Women are still paid less than men at every educational level and in every job category. They are less likely than men to hold jobs that offer flexibility or family-friendly benefits. When they become mothers, they face more scrutiny and prejudice on the job than fathers do. (ibid)

When we hear the US commentators lecturing developing countries on women's rights and on the importance of women in development roles, we need to get them also to turn the critical gaze back on themselves and also to be wary of easy models of development emulation based on the US, or indeed, any western country.

Notes

1. See http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/63,397/richard-n-haass/the-age-of-nonpolarity.
2. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2013.pdf.
3. http://www.weforum.org/issues/global-gender-gap.
4. https://www.uvm.edu/~sseguino/pdf/equalizer.pdf.

5. United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS).
6. See http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/2014/08/01/Syrian-refugee-women-face-sexual-exploitation.html.
7. http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/24/-ISIS-order-female-genital-mutilation-in-Iraq.html.
8. http://womanalone.unhcr.org/mobile/.
9. http://www.economist.com/node/15606229.
10. 'Why Gender Equality Stalled' Stephanie Coontz', February 16, 2013 at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/opinion/sunday/why-gender-equality-stalled.html?pagewanted=all.

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