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**REVIEW ESSAY MODERNITATEA TENDENȚIALĂ. REFLECȚII DESPRE  
EVOLUȚIA MODERNĂ A SOCIETĂȚII,  
EDITURA TRITONIC, BUCUREȘTI, 2016. CONSTANTIN SCHIFIRNEȚ**

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## REVIEW ESSAY

# *MODERNITATEA TENDENȚIALĂ. REFLECȚII DESPRE EVOLUȚIA MODERNĂ A SOCIETĂȚII<sup>1</sup>, EDITURA TRITONIC, BUCUREȘTI, 2016. CONSTANTIN SCHIFIRNEȚ*

Ion Matei COSTINESCU\*

### Abstract

This review essay examines the theory of tendential modernity, elaborated by Constantin Schifirneț, through the lens of decolonial theory. It attempts to put these two macrosociological paradigms into a critical dialogue.

*Keywords:* tendential modernity; Constantin Schifirneț; decoloniality; decolonial option.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* modernitate tendențială; Constantin Schifirneț; decolonialitate; opțiunea decolonială.

Constantin Schifirneț's *Modernitatea tendențială. Reflecții despre evoluția modernă a societății* [*Tendential modernity. Reflections on the modern evolution of society*] is a well-informed intervention in the ongoing scholarly debates concerning the nature of modernity and the processes whereby societies become modern<sup>2</sup>. Although the absence of detailed empirical case studies qualifies this text as a primarily theoretical undertaking rather than a work of historical sociology, the book synthesizes, refines, and expands upon the author's previous work concerning the concept of "tendential modernity" (Schifirneț, 2009, 2012). The author initially elaborated this concept as a means of explaining the modernization of Romanian society from the perspective of Titu Maiorescu's (1840-1917) seminal theory of forms without substance (Schifirneț, 2007; Maiorescu, 1868). In the present book, Schifirneț argues that the notion of "tendential modernity" is a heuristic device

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applicable to the development of all modern societies. Importantly, the author also promises a future case-study that will more thoroughly explain how the modernization of Romanian society led to a “modernity deficit” characterized by the perpetuation of “certain historical processes of uneven social and economic development” (pp. 12-13).

Accordingly, Schifirneț conceptualizes “modernity” as a type of social evolution that characterizes societies with an “insufficiently functional economy”. In such societies, the cleavage between the more rapid tempo of institutional innovation and the slower pace of economic development means that the cultural, political, and intellectual spheres modernize faster than the economy (p. 12). It is for this reason that the author emphasizes the “tendential” aspect of modernity, which he defines as a “majoritarian orientation” towards one option out of several available. Consequently, though the local hypostases of modernity are shaped by specific historical, political, cultural, and geopolitical factors, all modern societies develop firmly, if not inevitably, in the same general direction (pp. 13-14, 89). It is precisely because not every individual, group, or institution within a given society participates in the modern way of life that modernity constitutes a historical tendency rather than a clearly-established fact. In this framework, modernity is defined as an ensemble of characteristics comprising industrial capitalism, democratic political organization, and bureaucratization, as well as a complex, class-based social structure. These characteristics appear in “mosaic-like fashion” in virtually all non-Western modern societies without crystallizing in a clear “dominant form” (pp. 14, 21, 27).

Problematically, then, Schifirneț posits the Occidental model of modernity as normative. This model, he believes, developed “organically” and is concretized in all cultural, social, and institutional structures underpinning Western societies, as opposed to non-Western areas where it occurs only in “tendential” forms. By and large, the argument goes, the modernization of the West occurred without a deliberate strategy to bring this about, being a consequence of economic development and of universal revolutions in science and technology (pp. 14, 17, 22). More precisely, the author maintains that, in a *longue durée* framework, the notion of a coherent Occidental modernity is valid from roughly 1500 until the 1960s, after which the world entered an era of “global modernity” in which the West is but one of several “configurators of modernity”. The latter include Japan and the new “Asian Tigers” (pp. 68, 127). In turn, this provides a rationale for developing an ideal-type, “transhistorical” model of modernity, in which the “benchmark for measuring tendentiality results from the interaction with the variety of modernities historically constituted outside Occidental space” (p. 68). As measured against this ideal-type, the actual historical forms of Western modernity are in themselves tendential. This is a nice way of putting the problem, to be sure, one which seeks to avoid the theoretical hierarchization and reification of the Western historical experience. But, as is the case with similar models,

the underlying premise that Western modernity developed in an organic fashion cannot, ultimately, be factually validated or disproven in a positivistic sense.

This is despite the evidence deployed in the sixth chapter to support this view, which provides a brief historical overview, from 1500 onwards, of Western civilization as modernity's emergent space. For Schifirneț, one of the main reasons modernity emerged and developed in the West was a persistently favorable attitude towards social change. In the West, he asserts, there "existed a communication between thinkers, there was no obstacle, the great thinkers debated with one another, while science and culture were everywhere institutionalized. In the Western space, there was a true competition for progress" (p. 129). This reviewer, however, does not find such categorical claims entirely convincing. At most, one could assert that in the West one finds internally more linear and coherent patterns of modernization.

Be that as it may, the proper questions which a reviewer must pose are as follows: a) does the concept of "tendential modernity" have explanatory power and, if so, to what extent?; b) does the author's explanatory framework properly account for competing macrosociological perspectives? With certain provisos, the answer to these questions is yes. Indeed, one of the commendable aspects of this study is that it sought to incorporate and account for the various lines the critiques adduced from within world-systems analysis, post-colonial, and decolonial studies to the Eurocentric and teleological presuppositions inherent in classic theories of modernity and modernization. Accordingly, the first three chapters constitute a sustained engagement with the extant sociological literature pertaining to the concept of modernity, theories of modernization, and typologies of modernity. These various typologies were developed to make sense of modernity's manifold historical and geographical forms, and include liquid modernity, reflexive modernity, compressed modernity, organized modernity, regional modernities, and second modernity. Schifirneț suggests that these typologies are in themselves expressions of modernity's tendential character (pp. 51-52). Together, these chapters amount to an excellent overview of contemporary macrosociological theory, useful for both practitioners in the field and advanced graduate students. Cognizant that Western societies with a "well-structured modernity" have an "expansionist" vocation that tends to universalize their experience and impose their values and designs on other societies, Schifirneț is critical of the evolutionist timelines and the global hierarchies of "backwardness" which were the hallmark of older modernization paradigms (pp. 12, 15).

In this way, the economic underdevelopment, weak civil societies, authoritarianism, racism, and gender inequality that have marked the historical experience of areas such as Latin America and South-East Asia are seen as "characteristics of tendential modernity". This is but another way of saying that these historical experiences reveal the limits of an "incomplete modernization", thereby also explaining the persistence of premodern social practices as a characteristic feature of tendential modernity (pp. 85-87, 111). Nevertheless,

Schifirneț himself acknowledges that economic underdevelopment and systemic inequalities were part and parcel of the Western colonial legacy (p. 54). Hence, had he foregrounded systemic and/or direct violence as constitutive features of tendential modernity, rather than seeing it as “failed” or “incorrectly applied” modernization, his arguments would have been even more convincing (p. 49). „Furthermore, some scholars would argue that is precisely the modern colonial apparatus which casts “non-modern” knowledges and practices as “premodern”, thereby reproducing Western hegemony and dominance (cf.; Lugones 2010: 743; Mignolo 2011).

The remainder of the book unfolds logically, dealing more extensively with the concrete characteristics of tendential modernity and their institutionalization through the agency of elites and/or the state, particularly in rural space. Though the role of elites and of the state in promoting modernization is a mainstay of sociological scholarship, for Schifirneț they assume particular importance because “the tendentiality of modernity occurs when modernization is designed and planned as opposed to classical modernity whose consequences are not planned” (p. 109). Hence, there is always a gap between the relatively small groups who advocate and benefit from modernization, and the large social groups who continue to adhere to traditional ways of life. In this framework, the pertinent question becomes whether elites only promoted top-down modernization or whether they also supported modernization “from below”. Based on the historical experience of Romania, Italy, and India, Schifirneț concludes that, although there is a fundamental contradiction within tendential modernity between the “force of tradition” and the Western-type values and institutions promoted by elites, modernizing reforms, such as abolition of serfdom and land redistribution had enjoyed widespread popular support (pp. 114-115). This is precisely why the role of institutions such as the state that can promote modernization over several generations and legitimize its consequences is so important.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the question of state intervention in rural space, the *locus classicus* of the premodern way of life. Noting that modernization tends to transform peasants into farmers and industrial workers, as well as render the countryside dependent on urban centers, the author is justly critical of both capitalist and Marxist-inspired theories of modernization that view peasants as anachronistic; the more so, since the formation of modern national states has typically involved appropriating elements of traditional folk culture, such as music and costumes as national symbols (p. 136). Moreover, he points to theorists such as Constantin Stere (1865-1936) who have long advocated programs of rural modernization based on the actual needs of the peasantry. In Stere’s case, this involved cooperativization and the development of cottage industries. A more recent example is China. In contrast to what happened in the USSR, the Chinese Communist Party refrained from destroying the peasantry. Chinese modernization

thus took place “through the internalization of the principle of the industrial revolution, but also through the rejuvenation of the indigenous characteristics of a predominantly rural society”, by extending the benefits of modernization in areas such as health and education (p. 139).

Two important conclusions follow from the author’s extended analysis of these issues. First, that peasant and agrarian systems hinder modernization only to the extent that the projected changes aim to destroy said systems, rather than incorporate them into the project of modernization (p. 142). Second, that efficacious rural modernization is often times predicated on the successful modernization of the state, for example in the form of better infrastructure and communications. A classic example is the “structured modernity” that came about through the modernization of late-nineteenth century rural France, as detailed by Eugene Weber’s famous study on how peasants became Frenchmen (pp. 146-147). For this very reason, in societies undergoing rapid modernization processes, social and political elites typically aim for the “permanent strengthening” of the state. This is because they view the state as the one institution capable of “creating the social framework for the unfolding of modernization processes”, including institutional modernization (p. 154). In sum, Schifirneț’s thesis concerning the tendential nature of modernity is an erudite, ably defended argument well-worth taking into consideration.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>Available for download at <https://bibliotecadesociologie.ro/download/schifirnet-constantin-2016-modernitatea-tentiala-reflectii-despre-evolutia-moderna-a-societatii-bucuresti-tritonic/>

<sup>2</sup>All translations from Romanian are mine.

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