

INTRODUCTION

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J. Smith's book on *Europe and the Americas: The Atlantic Modernity of State Formation, Capitalism and Civilizations* constitutes a distinct contribution to comparative historical and sociological analysis. This contribution is a triple one, to three distinct arenas or dimensions of comparative historical analysis and perhaps above all in the combination thereof.

The first such dimension is the emphasis on the importance of the Atlantic experience in the formation of early European state, economic and culture formations, i.e. of early European modernity. Several works have already pointed out that the crystallization of early modern states and economic formations was influenced by the colonial expansion and by the European colonization in the Americas—as for instance the influence of the extraction of gold from the colonies on early modern Spanish economy—and on its ultimate decline, or as C. H. R. James has pointed out earlier on that slave trade and slavery were the basis of the French Revolution. Other researchers have pointed out that the colonial experience—as for instance the experience of the British raj in India has been of crucial importance to the formations of the British modern state and society.

But Smith's analysis goes beyond such important indications. He shows that it is not enough to point out that the political, economic and cultural formations of early modern states was influenced by the colonial experience—but that basically the colonial formations were part and partial of crystallization of political, economic and cultural formations in Europe, that the two processes constitute part of the one common broader process. Or in other words he shows that the European and the Atlantic formations were constitutive of one another, or perhaps more precisely that they constitute components of one process—that of constitution of Atlantic modernity or modernities.

This type of analysis is also in principle highly attuned to these works which attempt to put different “local” “state” or “national” developments in the wider context of “world historical” developments—such as for instance the analysis of the formations of the Qing dynasty

in China in the framework of Eurasian global developments¹—a mode of analysis which points to possible reformulation of the relations between “national” and world historical processes.

The second distinct innovative dimension of Smith’s work is the analysis of the patterns of early modernity as they crystallized in the different Atlantic countries—both in Europe and in the Americas. As against the relatively wide-spread view to be found, even if mostly implicitly, especially in the many theories of modernization that the European modernity is the natural model thereof – according to which others have to be judged, Smith shows that not only even in Europe—or to be more exact—in the framework of Atlantic modernities—there developed in different historical contexts not one, but several patterns of multiple modernities, i.e. the Atlantic modernity or modernities is only one of several patterns of multiple modernities which develop in different historical contexts.

The third contribution of Smith’s analysis is, following recent developments in social and historical analysis²—i.e. the emphasis on the importance of civilizational institutional and cultural frameworks, encompassing different political and economic formations in shaping the self-understanding and collective identities of Atlantic countries.

But perhaps above all the distinctive contribution of Smith’s analysis is the combination of all these dimensions—as they converge in the formations of multiple modernities in their historical and civilizational contexts. It is this combination which provided important indications for new directions in a comparative historical research.

¹ See for instance Struve, L. A. (ed.) 2004, *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

² See for instance Arjomand, S. A. and Tiryakian, E. A. (eds.), 2004, *Rethinking Civilizational Analysis*. Sage Publications.