A Discussion of Three Theoretical Approaches to Modernity:
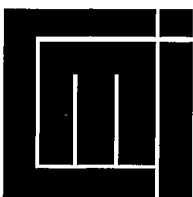## Understanding Modernity as a Globalising Phenomenon

Marit Tjomsland

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Chr. Michelsen Institute
Development Studies and Human Rights
Bergen Norway

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Summary:

The paper compares the potential of three theories of modernity for explaining the current Islamist revival as an element of modernising Muslim societies. The theories discussed are *rationalist fundamentalism* as represented by Ernest Gellner, what may be called *Muslim fundamentalism* as represented by Akbar Ahmed, and a *relativist* approach as represented by Anthony Giddens.

Sammendrag:

Notatet sammenligner tre ulike moderniseringsteoriers potensiale for å forklare den islamistiske oppblomstringen som et element av muslimske samfunn i ferd med å gjennomgå en moderniseringsprosess. Teoriene som blir diskutert er rasjonell fundamentalisme som den blir presentert av Ernest Gellner, hva man kan kalle muslimsk fundamentalisme som den blir presentert av Akbar Ahmed, og en relativistisk tilnærming som den blir presentert av Anthony Giddens.

Contents

Introduction

This essay will focus on three theoretical approaches to modernity, and examine their analytical possibilities and limitations when it comes to understanding modernity — in itself, and as a globalising phenomenon. The significance of the discussion does, however, reach beyond the approaches' ability to deal with modernity in particular, since their strengths and weaknesses relate to their respective core theoretical standpoints, and therefore will tend to guide and define their analytical scopes independent of the concrete object of examination.

This query into modernity is intended as an initial clarifying part of a study of Islamic fundamentalist ideology and practice in Tunisia. The main focus of the study will be on the *nature* of Tunisian Islamic fundamentalism; is it a regressive or modernising force? It will obviously be impossible to deal with such a question without a clarification of the concept of modernity, and this essay is a contribution to clarifying the concept.

Due to the nature of my project it is furthermore natural to focus on one particular aspect of modernity, namely its much debated relationship to the Western part of the world. One generally tends to agree that modernity first occurred in Western countries, and that it was certain concurrent characteristics of the Western historical development that in the first place brought it about. When it comes to the consequences of this for a global concept of modernity, the voices are, however, less unanimous. Three different views on this question are discussed in this essay:

As a representative of what he himself calls *Rationalist fundamentalism*, Ernest Gellner in his recent book *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*[1] offers a rare "positivist" analysis of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism and its relationship to modernity.

Akbar Ahmed's book *Postmodernism and Islam*[2] provides what I have chosen to name a *Muslim fundamentalist* view on the same topic. The consequences of modernity for Muslim societies has for almost two centuries been a question of great concern to Muslim scholars, and the essay would be incomplete without a representative of this scholarly tradition.

There is another reason why these two books have been chosen to represent their respective theoretical traditions: they were originally intended to be published as a joint volume. In the preface to his book, Gellner explains why he found this an attractive idea:

[1] E Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London: Routledge, 1992.
[2] A.S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam*, London: Routledge, 1992.

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I accepted the invitation for various reasons, which included the consideration that it was a good thing to show that a fullblooded, committed believer [in Islam] and an intellectual adherent of Enlightenment doubt could face each other within the compass of a single volume, discussing, more or less, the same theme, and to do so with courtesy and in an amicable manner. It might even set a good example.[3]

However, as Ahmed puts it in *his* preface,

the publishers felt that both "parts" would be better served as two separate, independent volumes. Although we were looking at the same problem we were covering two different areas and this was, perhaps, the most felicitous way of presenting our findings.[4]

This intended book-project adds an intriguing extra dimension to the discussion of the two theoretical positions involved, as it represents two different fundamentalists' attempts to make sense of a third kind of fundamentalism. The one thing all three fundamentalisms have in common is a belief in a *fundamental*, "a leading or primary principle, rule, law, or article, which serves as the groundwork or basis"[5] for what they are doing. The rest is different: Gellner claims to be a *methodological* fundamentalist, while Ahmed is a *substantive* fundamentalist. So are, strictly speaking, the Islamic fundamentalists they both seek to explain, but it is the strict *politico-religious* nature of their fundamentalism that stands out as its major defining characteristic. Some effort will be made to identify the reasons why Gellner and Ahmed's contributions could not be published as a single volume.

With his *relativist* standpoint, Anthony Giddens represents a third central theoretical tradition within the social sciences. The book *The consequences of Modernity*[6] presents his approach to making sense of modernity, an approach that differs substantially from those of both Gellner and Ahmed. I will argue that his contribution differs from the two others in degree of *fruitfulness* as well as substance, and that it offers a constructive approach to understanding both modernity and Islamic fundamentalism.

The objective of this essay is not to reveal the ultimate ontological definition of modernity. The ambition is rather to illuminate some of the many theoretical problems attached to the discussion of modernity, thereby hoping to make my future venture into this landscape not entirely accidental.

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[3]E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London: Routledge, 1992, p vii.

[4]A.S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam*, London: Routledge, 1992, p ix.

[5]*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983.

[6]A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Rationalist fundamentalism

We know better — but how do we know that we know better? Others think the same with even greater confidence. There is a profound irony about the fact that this self-doubt has become most acute and anguished in the one civilization which really does know better — namely, our own.[7]

This quote presents the core of Ernest Gellner's epistemological argument, that also constitutes the basis of *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. The book is a discussion of what he sees as the three major contestants on the current global arena of faith: Religious fundamentalism, represented by contemporary Islamic resurgence, relativism, represented by postmodernism, and Enlightenment rationalist fundamentalism, the faith to which he himself adheres. His focus is on the theoretical implications of the different faiths, and, to some extent, on the historical and social settings that have produced them.

Gellner makes no secret about being a fundamentalist believer. However, his faith is not based in any religion, but in "the Kantian or Enlightenment ethic of cognition", and his fundamentalism is not substantive, but methodological. In his view, this both elevates him from the relativists' pit of incoherence and hypocrisy, and relieves him of substantive fundamentalists' problem of being inherently unscientific. I will argue that contrary to what he claims, he is not exempt from the fundamentalist dilemma of tautological argumentation that always leads back to the same infertile point of departure: the others are wrong because they are not like me, since I am, beyond discussion, fundamentally right. I will furthermore argue that this dilemma makes him unable to constructively deal with both modernity and Islamic fundamentalism.

Gellner is one of few contemporary social scientists subscribing to the classical, often called positivistic, scientific method, of which the existence of an objective social world as well as objective human knowledge about this world is a precondition. Therefore, his book provides a rare analysis of the current Islamic resurgence, as seen from this theoretical point of view. One of the more intriguing contrasts between more common perceptions of this phenomenon and Gellner's, is that he clearly finds Islamic fundamentalists' concrete choice of fundamentalism significantly more objectionable than their rejection of other ways of believing, thinking and acting but their own. But let us first examine the theoretical lines along which he has been thinking in order to reach this conclusion:

The cognitive procedure he subscribes to is that of the Enlightenment scientific revolution, which took place in the Western world at the transition to modern, industrialised society. Its fundamentals will be familiar to most of us: There are

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[7]E. Gellner, *Relativism and the Social Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p 1.

neither privileged or a priori substantive truths, nor privileged sources or affirmations. Therefore, all facts and observers are equal, and no combinations of facts can be taken for granted or exempted from scrutiny. The fact that the world will tend to present itself as interlinked sets of facts does not change this; on the contrary, it only emphasises the scientist's obligation to dismember the sets and de-link the links. Furthermore, these atomised facts which constitute the world obey general and symmetric laws. These are in principle comprehensible to the human being — as long as he or she follows the right cognitive procedure, and applies both in cognition and conduct the Kantian ethic, which includes the obligation to be rational, the refusal to make exceptions, and the determination to treat all cases alike while seeking to unify them in an orderly system. No facts, only the Method, is absolute.

These theses, and the method they imply, does to Gellner mark the end of scientific history. They represent "knowledge-proper", a cognitive system superior to all others, whether they are known or yet unknown. The proof is that pre-Enlightenment cognitive systems produced technically less advanced societies whose inferiority was exposed by the Method's rapid conquest of them, as well as the urge with which non-enlightened societies did — and still do — embrace their conqueror.

The Method claims transcendence, even double transcendence. Adoption of the cognitive strategy will lead both beyond culture — a culture and all cultures — and beyond this world. The Method "would be the right strategy in *any* world".[8]

There is, in fact, no way of proving that the world actually *is* tidy, symmetric, and law-abiding. According to Kant, (according to Gellner,) we "make" the world tidy by application of the cognitive procedure, that allows us to show that nature *must appear* to be orderly, symmetric, and law-bound. This we can do because as human beings we have the capacity to transcend nature.

At this stage, some questions need clarification. First of all, exactly how and why are we able to step out of nature and examine it as if we were not parts, let alone products of it? Gellner finds that Kant's dualism solves this problem, by stating that everything that is part of nature — including human beings as observable phenomena — is subjected to causality, but that we, as moral and cognising agents, are exempted from membership in nature. Our moral and cognising capacities give us access to transcendent knowledge and morality. The existence of orderly nature and morals is the very proof of this:

[8]E.Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London: Routledge, 1992, p 82.

> A tidy law-bound natural world, *and* a tidy law-bound morality, were our own creation, and constitute the conclusive evidence that our true selves stood outside the Nature which they had made.[9]

We notice that Kant restricts his argument to *nature*. Another question that has been posed with some persistence during the last decades, is whether human interaction is nature or *culture*, that is, something which is different from nature because it is created by humans as cognising and moral actors. This question was not treated by Kant because, according to Gellner, culture at his time was unknown as a concept. He furthermore seems to be of the opinion that there is still no need to deal with it, even though culture for some time now has been known. Gellner in fact writes off the main discussion in contemporary theory of the social sciences with a parenthesis:

> Kant, the deepest thinker of the Enlightenment, was very clear about it. Everything inside Nature was indeed subject to its laws, but knowledge itself — and morality — were *outside* it. (A fortiori, they were outside and above culture, as yet unnamed.)[10]

It follows from this that Gellner does not consider how we can be certain that human beings when observed as *objects* obeying the laws of nature, do not at the time observe, that is, engage in activities reserved humans as *subjects*; if they do, their double transcendence beyond their culture as well as beyond this world would make them rather bothersome objects of observation. It might even make a replacement of the Method with some other method for the social sciences worth considering.

Gellner is right when he claims to be preaching a fundamentalist belief rather than discussing methodological tools. He is also right when he states that his fundamentalism is moral in addition to methodological. His claim that it is also cognitive is, however, more dubious, since belief is normally not considered an intellectual exercise. What are his arguments in favour of converting to this belief? We should accept Enlightenment Rationalist Fundamentalism because, says Gellner, "We cannot do any better".[11] And since what he offers marks the end of scientific history, we will consequently never be able to do any better. The question is, is it good enough to be worth the effort? Is it useful when it comes to understanding important social phenomena like religious fundamentalism, modernity, or even Gellner's main opponents, the relativists?

In spite of the fact that the better part of *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* is dedicated to the theme, a short quote sums up the essence of Gellner's fundamentalism as he applies it to relativism:

[9]Ibid. p 83.
[10]Ibid. p 83.
[11]Ibid. p 94.

> To the relativists, one can only say — you provide an excellent account of the manner in which we choose our menu or our wallpaper. As an account of the realities of our world and a guide to conduct, your position is laughable.[12]

It is not this conclusion in itself that is problematic, but the way Gellner reaches it. Or rather, the problem is that the conclusion appears to have been given from the start, because he nowhere in the discussion moves beyond it. Considering the earlier quoted parenthesis of his, this is not very surprising; after writing off relativism's core argument as non-existing, it does not make sense to discuss it seriously.

Even though he presents his book as a discussion of postmodernism, he quickly confesses that

> My real concern is with *relativism*: the postmodernist movement, which is an ephemeral cultural fashion, is of interest as a living and contemporary specimen of relativism, which as such is of some importance and will remain with us for some time.[13]

This shift in topic does, however, not really harm or change his procedure: By defining postmodernism as a current expression of relativism — which, we recall, he defines as a useful hobby for home decorators — he conveniently escapes any serious exposure of his own belief to the arguments of its contestants, whether it be relativists in general or postmodernists in particular. Furthermore, by stating that the "interpretative mood" that has fostered both contestants is intellectual fantasy presented by frustrated academics in search for a way to legitimate their wages,[14] he also escapes having to relate to the real world; since his opponents deal with fantasy rather than reality, nothing they say will have any scientific significance, and his arguments remain unchallenged.

This is indeed the cognitive procedure of a fundamentalist: Because his belief *must be* true, he refuses to even hear contesting arguments, let alone consider them, and to be certain that his belief remains spotless, he keeps it clear of the real world, too.

Let us now turn to Gellner's fundamentalism applied on Islamic fundamentalists. Paradoxically, perhaps, they fare much better under his scrutiny than the relativists:

[12]Ibid. p 96.
[13]Ibid. p 24.
[14]Ibid. p 46.

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The [Islamic] fundamentalists deserve our respect, both as fellow recognizers of the uniqueness of truth, who avoid the facile self-deception of universal relativism, and as our intellectual ancestors.[15]

Their status as intellectual ancestors of course implies that they are behind us in intellectual development — because, one must assume, their fundamentalism is substantive rather than methodological. Gellner sees their backwardness as a result of certain characteristics of their history of religion. Unlike in Christian history, religious movements of reform have in the Muslim World been unable to produce progress, intellectual as well as social. The division of Islam into the scripturalist "high Islam" of the scholars and the urban elites and the less correct "low Islam" of the basically rural commoners is, according to Gellner, the reason behind this lack of progress. The relationship between these two "Islams" has historically never been dynamic; "high Islam's" attempts to convert the adherents of "low Islam" have only been temporarily successful. Tradition and folk belief have always conquered the minds of the commoners again, and taken Muslim societies back to square one.

The recent modernisation of Muslim societies has, however, finally put an end to this infertile circle, as it has deleted what "low Islam" has been feeding on for centuries, traditional mind and society. This time there is no way back, because there is no longer anything to return to. Far from being a problem, this is actually the background for fundamentalist Islam's current astonishing strength and vitality, states Gellner. Modernisation decreases the part of the population inclined to identify with "low Islam", but since "high Islam" provides an alternative religious interpretation well suited for the growing modern urban middle classes, Islam does not suffer from the secularisation that has come with modernisation in other religions. On the contrary, this finally dynamic relationship between the two "Islams" provides a perfect answer to the dilemma of other modernising third world societies: should one abandon one's past in order to gain strength, or preserve one's cultural inheritance and stay weak? Muslim societies have to do neither, because the "high", puritan version of Islam is combinable with modern society. What is more, by explaining a humiliating colonial past with adherence to "bad" Islam, modern Islamic fundamentalists also manage to deal with a major historical trauma in a constructive way. In other words, Fundamentalist Islam does *not* hinder modernisation; in fact, it rather seems to nourish it:

on the evidence available so far, the world of Islam demonstrates that it is possible to run a modern, or at any rate modernizing, economy, reasonably permeated by the appropriate technological, educational, organization principles, *and* combine it with a strong, pervasive, powerfully internalized Muslim conviction and identification. A puritan and scripturalist

[15]Ibid. p 95.

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The above analysis does not entirely fit with Gellner's general analysis of modernity and its relationship to the West: Modern society first developed in Europe, and is in that sense a Western phenomenon. The Enlightenment Rationalist Fundamentalism occurred in the same area at the same time, and was a methodological precondition for modernisation. Since modern society came about as a result of the cognitive procedure that marks the end of scientific history, it logically follows that modern society is the end of *social* history. This has a number of implications. First, it makes "postmodern society" a meaningless concept (which may explain why Gellner nowhere in his book relates to it). Secondly, it implies a universal concept of progress, where the West has reached the finish in the global race of intellectual and social development, while the other participants follow in our track. This is a quite common way of thinking, and not very surprising. What *is* rather surprising, is the inconsistency between this idea of modernity and Gellner's analysis of fundamentalist Islam. How can Islamic societies reach the finish in the race without accepting and adopting the necessary preconditions for getting there? Gellner provides no answer to this question; he in fact appears unconscious of the contradiction.

The concept of universal progress is also the basis of Gellner's analysis of the actual nature of the contemporary modern world. The pre-modern division of the world into isolated, autonomous culture-areas constituted an untidy and heterogenous cultural world. This changed with the opening up of global inter-cultural relations that came as a consequence of modernity. The world is now one homogenous area, where the cognitive procedure of the Enlightenment is generally recognised as the superior method. Any tendency towards relativism is therefore not only unnecessary, but destructive and unacceptable.

Even though Gellner somehow seems to exempt the Islamic world from the validity of this analysis, it is clear that he thinks it would be served with a change of fundamentalism, from the religious to the rationalist. What is Gellner's advise in relation to such a transfer? Islamic fundamentalists — who are generally known to view the religion as the only legitimate source of information about how every aspect of life should be led, be it economic, social, political, or private — should introduce *constitutional religion*. This new relation between faith and social order is an analogy to *constitutional monarchy*, which is

a system which retains the ritual and symbolism of genuine monarchy, whilst transferring most of the real business of running society to a more technical, secular and unsacrilized sphere. ... Ritual now mirrors, not the real situation, but the past or a fictitious distribution

[16]Ibid. p 22.

of social power. The separation of powers is extended to the institutionalization of the distinction between symbolism and decision-making.[17]

This or similar propositions are made quite frequently by well-meaning Westerners trying to figure out the current fundamentalism in the Muslim World. The fact that the vast majority of Islamic fundamentalists are *not* inhabitants of Islamic societies, but parts of opposition movements fighting their respective political regimes basically because of their division of religion and the "real business of running society", does, however, make such propositions rather unrealistic. The fact that the few existing Islamic fundamentalist states tend to see it as their main objective to avoid any tendency toward such division — the upheaval of it was after all their main reason to take power — adds to the proposition's lack of realism. The distance between Gellner and his intellectual ancestors the Islamic fundamentalists may when it comes to it be larger than he seems to think. In any case, his analysis makes it reasonable to question whether the cognitive procedure of the Enlightenment rationalist fundamentalism is the best strategy to making sense of other fundamentalists.

Gellner does not succeed in presenting a constructive analysis of Islamic fundamentalism. Nor does he appear able to deal with modernity in any fertile way. Because he insists to be loyal to a cognitive approach rather than to the social world it is supposed to explain, he is obliged to deny the existence of the strong and all to obvious suggestions that he is advocating an impotent theory of social science. His consequent fundamentalism actually manages to discredit the object of his belief in a fairly effective way. Is this a necessary and inherent consequence of all fundamentalism? Let us turn to another fundamentalist social scientist, and see if he is able to give *his* belief more credit as an approach to understanding modernity and Islamic fundamentalism.

Muslim fundamentalism

Firmly rooted in a Muslim fundament, Akbar Ahmed in his *Postmodernism and Islam* applies a relativistic approach to his discussion of what he sees as the two major opponents at the contemporary global arena: the Muslim and the Western worlds. The combination of fundamentalism and relativism may appear contradictory, but is actually a basic characteristic of Muslim intellectual tradition, a characteristic that even allows Ahmed to use freely what he calls a "postmodernist method"[18] without disturbing the fact that he writes as "Muslim fundamentalist", in the same way as Gellner writes as an "Enlightenment rationalist fundamentalist". Ahmed sheds some light on this apparent paradox when he states that

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[17]Ibid. p 91.

[18]A.S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam*, London: Routledge, 1992, p ix.

Although Muslims may employ some of the conceptual tools of Francois Lyotard or Jean Baudrillaud for analysis, there must be a parting of company on certain crucial points. While Muslims appreciate the spirit of tolerance, optimism and the drive for self-knowledge in postmodernism, they also recognize the threat it poses them with its cynicism and irony. This is a challenge to the faith and piety which lies at the core of their world-view.[19]

Ahmed's Muslim fundamentalism is — unlike Gellner's — *not universal*. This has to do with the basically inward-directed and territorial nature of Islam, that restricts the validity of its rules to the *Umma*, the Muslim cultural and geographic world. In other words, Muslim fundamentalism is a culturally limited fundamentalism, which implies a perception of the world as divided between Muslims and the "others". This dualistic world-view opens up for the combination of fundamentalism — *inside* the Muslim world — and relativism — *between* the Muslim world and "the others". It furthermore implies that the relativism, since it is based on a non-negotiable fundament, becomes not only limited, but also normative. We are thus dealing with a "relative fundamentalism" and a "normatively founded relativism", each being dependent on the other.

Furthermore, Ahmed's Muslim fundamentalism is — unlike Gellner's — *substantive*. Acceptance of divine revelation and adherence to its message is the essence of Ahmed's self-definition as a Muslim. Rather than contradicting scholarly activity, this sets the coordinates for it, much in the same way as Gellner's fundamentalism gives his work direction and purpose. I will argue that while the Muslim *normatively founded relativism* gives Ahmed an advantage when it comes to analyzing the nature of Islamic fundamentalism, the Muslim *relative fundamentalism* and the dualistic world-view it implies in the end makes his analysis of the triangular relationship between modernity, the West and the Muslim world, infertile.

Ahmed's *Muslim* fundamentalism should not be confused with *Islamic* fundamentalism. While the latter in its contemporary forms should be seen mainly as political ideology, based on particular and in no way uncontested interpretations of Islam, the former is a broader concept, which is based on normative cultural and historical — as well as religious — criteria, and which includes Islamic fundamentalism as one of many variations. Ahmed adheres to a religious interpretative tradition which focuses on tolerance, dialogue, and individual intellectual development as main aspects of Islam. His normative project in *Postmodernism and Islam* of explaining the Muslims to the West and vice versa is therefore a natural prolongment of the religion he sees as the fundament of his life, including his scholarly activities.

It would make little sense to define Ahmed's theoretical standpoint in Western terms. The fact that Ahmed clearly does not perceive himself as part of or obliged

[19]Ibid. p 6.

by any Western intellectual tradition should in itself be a sufficient argument against that; furthermore, the existence of a rich Muslim intellectual tradition — which Ahmed *does* identify with — makes it more constructive to place him in this scholarly landscape rather than in the Western.

Contemporary Muslim scholarship can be visualised as a triangle, which corners are occupied by *traditionalists*, *radicals*, and *modernists*.[20] All positions within the triangle will have Muslim fundamentalism and the dualistic world view it implies as point of departure. As a consequence, Muslim scholarship is — as compared to its Western counterpart — characterised by a relative lack of occupation with debates of the "positivism versus relativism" kind. The normative, substantive fundamentalism which constitutes the epistemological basis of Muslim scholarship does quite simply not involve such concerns, since it makes the idea of a neutral, objective scientist not only impossible, but also uninteresting. Furthermore, we see that the dualistic world view is so fundamental to this tradition that differences in perceptions of the relationship between the Muslims and the "others" actually constitute the demarkation lines in the triangle, and even names the different camps: The contemporary *modernists* go rather far in minimising the non-negotiable Muslim fundament, and tend to see religion as an insufficient guide to managing the modern world; they furthermore look to the Western culture for the supplementary guidelines. *Traditionalists* and *radicals* agree that religion should be the cultural and religious basis of Muslim society; their differences are mainly strategic, and related to the question of how to relate to the "other":

> The radicals have lost patience with and rejected the traditionalists. There is a fine line — often breached — between traditionalists and those we call radicals in their faith and belief. It is in their strategy and style their difference lies.[21]

The traditionalists' strategy is characterised by understanding, tolerance, and inter-faith dialogue. The radicals — many of which may be termed "Islamic fundamentalists" — prefer confrontation and polarisation, as they find the traditionalists' project to have failed rather completely. The lines of the triangle of Muslim scholarship will, however, be as important as its corners, since the demarkation lines between the different standpoints tend to be less distinct than what is common in Western scholarly tradition. Ahmed's project to promote mutual understanding between the Muslim and Western worlds places him rather firmly within the traditionalist camp. At the same time, his "Western", easily accessible style of writing and his occupation with worldly, contemporary and popular matters like the media and Madonna the pop-star rather than Arab

[20]Ibid. p 157.
[21]Ibid. p 159.

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philosophy and Sufi mysticism clearly distinguishes his work from that of most traditionalists.

In the process of defining Ahmed as affiliated with the Muslim traditionalist camp within Muslim fundamentalist scholarship, it has become clear that his substantive fundamentalism is harder to argue with than Gellner's methodological fundamentalism; you either believe in Islam and accept its cultural and intellectual implications, or you don't. It should, however, also be evident that Ahmed's fundamentalism to a much lesser degree than Gellner's interferes directly in his scholarly work. It constitutes the normative fundament, but does not prescribe any particular method, and — equally important — it allows for and even encourages a proper discussion of the real world — after all, divine revelation can, unlike Gellner's secular belief, not be reputed by worldly facts. Therefore, Ahmed's contribution to understanding the nature of modernity, its relationship to the West, and Islamic fundamentalism's relationship to both, should no less then Gellner's be prematurely dismissed as invalidated by its fundamentalist point of departure.

Starting off with the assumption that the world is divided in two fundamentally different parts, Ahmed introduces his discussion of *modernity*[22] with the question of which part it belongs to; the alternative question of whether it might be universal is, seen from a Muslim dualistic world view, less evident. He not surprisingly attributes it to the West, and, unfortunately, discredits Giddens in the process:

> Antony Giddens poses a central, though little raised, question in relation to modernism: "is modernity a Western project?" (1990: 174). His blunt answer is "Yes" (ibid.: 175).[23]

(A more complete, and hopefully more just, quote of this argument of Giddens' will be presented and discussed later.) Ahmed's choice of definition of modernism suits his perception of it as a non-Muslim phenomenon:

> it is in the general sense of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition that the term is used: "modern view(s) or method(s), especially tendency in matters of religious belief to subordinate tradition to harmony with modern thought".[24]

His perception of modernity as inherently Western, that allows him as a non-Westerner to view it from a distance, actually enables him to analyze it in a considerably more interesting way than Gellner, to whom it constitutes an

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[22]Ahmed to a large extent uses "modernity" and "modernism", as well as "postmodernity" and "postmodernism" as interchangeable concepts throughout his text. For the sake of compatibility, I do the same when discussing him, even though such mixing of terms normally would not be acceptable.

[23]Ibid. p 7.

[24]Ibid. p 6.

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inseparable part of his belief, and therefore is basically untouchable. Ahmed sees modernism as connoting a historical period characterised by belief in science and progress, in one natural world order, and in the future. However, one characteristic of modernism which he particularly emphasises is *secularism*: ""Progressive", "scientific", "rational" — in all this there was no room for religion."[25] The use of past tense in this quote is not accidental — Ahmed regards modernism as history; postmodernism has taken over its place as the current dominating Western philosophy. Furthermore, he is, as a non-Westerner, quite happy with this change of guards in the camp of the "others":

> [One can make a] useful distinction between modern culture as elitist and inaccessible and postmodernism as popular and accessible; non-Western people can more readily identify with the latter.[26]

To Ahmed, postmodernism is as inherently Western as modernism, but its characteristics make it at least theoretically more friendly to non-Western cultures, since it lacks the belief in universalism, and thus is of a less imperialistic and more tolerant nature. On the other hand, postmodernism's lack of common belief in anything, be it progress, science, or religion, allows for both total nihilism and extremist belief in a quite different way than modernism did, and thus provides a fertile breeding ground for violent rejection of other cultures — an attitude which existence Ahmed finds proven by current trends such as the rising racism in Europe, and the Gulf war and the political climate that has followed it. There is, then, potentially larger scope for both tolerance and rejection of Muslim culture in postmodernism.

The fact that Ahmed sees both modernism and postmodernism as phenomenons alien to Muslim culture, does in no way imply that he finds them irrelevant; on the contrary, he actually imports the concepts to Muslim territory for the purpose of explaining recent Muslim history. "Muslim modernism" connotes the colonial and early post-colonial period, which, according to Ahmed, was characterised by an overall occupation with copying Western style and values; this was also the golden period of the Muslim modernist scholars. Thus, Muslim modernism's belief in the *Western* modernist project gives it a diametrically different character from Western modernism, which main characteristic was belief in its *own* project.
The connection between Western postmodernism and what Ahmed sees as its Islamic counterpart is less clear:

> Faith versus scepticism, tradition versus iconoclasm, purity versus eclecticism — it is difficult to relate Islamic postmodernism to Western postmodernism in any coherent or direct manner, or even to establish a casual relationship between the two. ... In the end, Islamic and Western postmodernism may have little more in common than that they are coetaneous,

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[25]Ibid. p 7.
[26]Ibid. p 7.

running concurrently. What we can state is that they may be entering this particular phase of their respective histories through different gates, propelled by different causes, still unsure of certain features, ... and even with a different understanding of the very nature of the age.[27]

One may of course discuss the usefulness of naming similarly two phenomenons that seem to have nothing in common. Be that as it may, we see from the quote that Ahmed's Muslim postmodernism emphasises the opposite values of the Western postmodernism: Muslims currently values faith, tradition, and purity. Furthermore, they express rage with the Western values their modernist predecessors embraced. This rage stems from bad experiences with failing Muslim modernist regimes, from identity confusion and loss of dignity caused by the modernist rejection of own tradition and culture, and — particularly — from the West's patronising, disrespectful and insulting attitudes towards the Muslims, expressed more intensely than ever before through Western media. Ahmed in fact suggests that the religious revival should be seen basically as a means to express the rage with and rejection of the West:

> The current postmodernist fundamentalism, in an important way, is novel because its basic èlan is anti-Western.... The pet issues with the neofundamentalists are the ban on bank interest, the ban on family planning, the status of women (contra the modernist), collection of *zakat*, and so forth — things that will most *distinguish* Muslims from the West. Thus, while the modernist was engaged by the West through attraction, the neorevivalist is equally haunted by the West through repulsion (Rahman 1984: 136).[28]

The *Islamic fundamentalist* is, then, the prototype of the Islamic postmodernist, and the radical scholars constitute the Muslim postmodernist intellectual avant garde. Ironically, their overriding occupation with rejecting the West makes them as dependent of this "other" as ever before; the Muslim seems eternally doomed to compare himself with the West in order to find out who he is. It would be too simplistic to attribute this dilemma only to a complex of inferiority caused by colonialism and centuries of political and economic defeat. Islam's inherent dualistic world view and the fundamentalist relativism that comes with it in fact makes this relative approach to defining self identity more or less obligatory. Muslim modernists and Islamic fundamentalists differ in view on the size and content of the Muslim fundament as well as on the nature of the relation to the "other"; none of them can, however, get away from the fact that there *is* a fundament, and that there *is* an "other".

Ahmed's analysis of Muslim modernists and Islamic fundamentalists makes sense; what about himself, as a *traditionalist*? While he explains rather well his neighbours occupying the other corners of the Muslim scholarship triangle, he is

[27]Ibid. p 5-6.
[28]Ibid. p 160.

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less successful when it comes to representing the occupants of his own traditionalist corner through his project of negotiating between Muslims and Westerners. Keeping all the time to a simplistic dualistic picture of the world, he comes out short of arguments; the easy "us" versus "the others" approach suits the purpose of the Islamic fundamentalists much better than his.

Therefore, his well meant attempt to be the explaining representative of the "Muslims", (of whom there are about one billion,) fails. Already on the cover of his book, he starts caricaturing his protegees by asking "why have jeans failed to catch on in Islamic countries?" Millions of Muslims love their jeans just as much as any Westerner; the question is absurd. (His answer is equally absurd: Muslims don't wear jeans because such clothing would "expose the external reproductive apparatus to damage" when they pray, or — as Muslims do — sit on the floor "for long periods".[29]

It is his traditionalism, in combination with the ever returning dualistic world view, that is at the root of his problems, since it forces him to define as "Muslim" the Muslim tradition only. The fact that quite a few Muslims actually possess chairs — *and* use them — seems to deserve no place in his picture of them. Similarly, he rejects the better part of contemporary Muslim societies as non-representative when he goes looking for the "Muslim sentiment":

> Which is the most reliable method of understanding Muslim sentiment? For this critical answer let us not go to the corridors of power in Muslim lands or their scholars or, indeed, their media for they are all, to an extent, influenced by the West, whether rejecting or accepting it. Let us instead look at the core of their religious structure, the mosque.[30]

One may of course wonder why Muslims read newspapers or watch TV if their sentiment is not reflected by the Muslim media. More interesting is the fact that Ahmed gets dangerously near the image of the "noble savage" in his description of the "true Muslim", as he comes to present education — be it classical (the scholars), professional (the media people), or political (the power establishment) — as corrupting the Muslim soul. Furthermore, his perception of the Muslims as fundamentally different from "others" is so profound that it leads him to implicitly argue that everything with them that resembles the "others" cannot be Muslim. It is therefore logical that the mosque is the only place he in a contemporary Muslim society can find Muslims who satisfy his requirements, since going to the mosque is the only thing only Muslims do.

Modernity is, then, to Ahmed not only of Western origin, but also of Western essence. It is therefore incompatible with the Muslim World, which is fundamentally different from the Western one. Thus, any "modern" aspect of

[29]Ibid. p 193.
[30]Ibid. p 195.

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Muslim societies is alien, and deserves no place in the picture of the "true Muslim". While the *relative* aspect of Ahmed's theoretical basis enables him to produce a constructive analysis of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism, we see that he, by adding traditionalist romanticism to the Muslim dualistic world view, allows the *fundamentalist* aspect of his theoretical standpoint to torpedo his analysis of modernity and its relationship to the Western and Muslim worlds.

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Mutual sympathy and a sense of common faith between two fundamentalists floating in the contemporary social scientific ocean of relativism may persuade them to try and share the same raft; the fact that their fundamentally different fundamentalisms sink each other's arguments with great precision does, however, make the project unadvisable — Routledge obviously discovered that, and avoided the wreck.

Of the two, the "unscientific", substantive fundamentalist actually comes out best. The reason seems to be that while Gellner believes in his object of research, Ahmed believes in God, and is therefore a degree freer than his colleague to go about his business. This freedom of his allows him to discover things Gellner has to close his eyes to. One discovery of his is that the increased contact between cultures of the last two centuries has messed the world up as much as it has ordered it. This discovery is linked to another, which is that the principles of the early modern period — belief in progress, in rationality, and in the perfect modern Utopia — have somehow gone out of fashion. Ahmed calls this phenomenon postmodern. Anthony Giddens, whose view on modernity we will be introduced to shortly, argues rather convincingly that rather than being *post modern* it is an inherent consequence of modernity, and therefore a part of it — he calls it *late modernity*.

Critical relativism

Sociological knowledge spirals in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and that universe as an integral part of that process.[31]

This quote of Anthony Giddens identifies him as a distinct *relativist*, an epistemological standpoint which makes his analysis of modernity, presented in the book *The Consequences of Modernity*, substantially different from both the earlier discussed contributions.

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[31]A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, p 15-16.

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Giddens' point of departure is a view on the social sciences as essentially different from the natural sciences. The latter study objects which because they cannot think cannot choose how to behave; their behaviour is therefore foreseeable, and it is the natural scientists' job to *predict* it. The social world is, by contrast, constituted by thinking "objects" who change their minds, and thus acts, in unpredictable ways. Since this implies that the social scientists cannot develop cumulative knowledge about the object of research in the same way as the natural scientists do, their job becomes, according to Giddens, rather different, and consists of *interpreting* social phenomena, rather than predicting them. These phenomena are, however, already products of human interpretation, and, moreover, liable to change as result of re-interpretation — including that of the social scientist. Social research is therefore a process of "double hermeneutics",[32] and of two-ways *communication*, rather than one-way *observation*. Thus, it is the human's ability to *reflexivity* that is at the core of Giddens' perception of the nature of the social sciences. I will argue that his relativist approach enables him to deliver a better and more convincing analysis of modernity than either of the two earlier discussed scholars, and that this approach also is well suited to discuss Islamic fundamentalism in a fertile way.

Giddens sees reflexivity as a fundamental defining characteristic of all human action, independent of its cultural setting. Modern society is, however, characterised by a radical *expansion* of the use and validity of reflexivity:

> In all cultures, social practices are routinely altered in the light of ongoing discoveries which feed into them. But only in the era of modernity is the revision of convention radicalised to apply (in principle) to all aspects of human life (....) What is characteristic of modernity is not an embracing of the new for its own sake, but the presumption of wholesale reflexivity — which of course includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself.[33]

Accepting this line of argument, modernity becomes a necessary precondition for the social sciences. To Giddens, this furthermore implies that social scientific activity is not essentially different from the interpretative activities people living under modern conditions engage in on a daily basis, and the social scientific *method* therefore comes to resemble the everyday human method of interpretation. It is therefore evident that a relativistic scientific method in no way can claim the status of universal scientific Method that we earlier have seen Gellner — as a positivist representative — attribute to the method he believes in ("belief" in scientific method is, of course, in a relativistic context meaningless, a contradiction of terms). Furthermore, the relativistic perception of science obviously has consequences for the status of social scientific production, or *theory*. To Giddens, the objective of the social sciences is to provide critical *insight* rather than facts, to produce *knowledge* rather than certainty. Since the object of study — as well as

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[32]Ibid. p 15.
[33]Ibid. p 38-39.

the very fundament of the science, as we shall see shortly — is in continuous change, anything else would be impossible.

What distinguishes social scientific activity from lay interpretative activity and makes it "scientific", is therefore a difference of *degree* rather than essence. Scientific interpretation is more systematic and thorough, and a scientific product — say, a theoretical concept — will be more critical, refined and precise than the corresponding lay concept. A scientific concept is therefore on a higher analytical level than a lay concept without being essentially different from it, and once formulated, it will "trickle down" and contribute to redefinition of the lay concept or phenomenon that initiated the formulation of it in the first place. Thus, in the same way as a society will never reach a "finish", the social scientific project will never even in theory reach an end.

While the radical reflexivity of modernity is a precondition for all the social sciences, Giddens identifies sociology as the discipline particularly concerned with the study of modernity *itself*. In other words, sociology is more than other disciplines engaged in the study of the preconditions for its own existence. It furthermore follows from this that Giddens' identification of *historicity*, or the "use of history to make history",[34] as a substantial phenomenon of modernity and a version of its radical brand of reflexivity, also applies to sociology, and makes it — in Giddens' eyes — a historistic science.

Correspondingly, Giddens understands the history of sociology as a reflection of the history of modernity. He attributes the early sociologists' tendency towards analyzing modernity in one-dimensional terms (Marx gave importance to capitalism, while Durkheim and Weber emphasised industrialism and rationalisation respectively as the main explanatory factors of modernity) to the comprehensive and rational appearance of early modern society. *Late* modern society has, however, according to Giddens taken on a quite different appearance; it is characterised by much greater complexity and impenetrability. This leads him to propose that

> Modernity (...) is *multidimensional on the level of institutions*, and each of the elements specified by these various [earlier sociological] traditions plays some part.[35]

Because modernity contains the necessary methodological tools for the study of itself, it is the key to both knowledge of its own nature, and knowledge of how to obtain this knowledge — or rather, of how to do sociology. Let us therefore now proceed to Giddens' analysis of modernity, a phenomenon he preliminarily defines as

[34]Ibid. p 50.
[35]Ibid. p 12.

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modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence.[36]

This "virtual" definition is characteristic for Giddens' way of approaching his object of study. He does this through an analysis of its *institutions*, and thus checks out the state of things before he develops theories about them. In so doing, he follows the opposite procedure of the two earlier discussed scholars, who both started off with a conviction about how the modern world according to their respective fundamentalisms *must be*. Furthermore, Giddens applies in his institutional analysis a "discontinuist" interpretation of modern social development.

By this I mean that modern social institutions are in some respects unique — distinct in form from all types of traditional order. Capturing the nature of the discontinuities involved, I shall argue, is a necessary preliminary to analyzing what modernity actually is, as well as diagnosing its consequences for us in the present day.[37]

Giddens' approach provides him with a greater scope than both Gellner and Ahmed have at their disposal for grasping the particularities of modernity. His focus on institutions enables him not only to realise that modernity is not — as Gellner may be said to claim — static, it leads him to identify *dynamic change* as its most central characteristic. The sources of this modern dynamism, and of the *"world-embracing"* nature of modernity which, according to Giddens, is an other of its central characteristics, are the same, and therefore constitute core elements of his argument:

Separation of time and space is the first phenomenon Giddens identifies as a fundamental precondition for modern social institutions. The standardisation of time that came above all with the introduction of the mechanical clock made possible a perception of time as independent from what happens during it, and thus "emptied" it. A consequence of such an "empty" time-concept is a separation of time from *space*. While a pre-modern time-concept like "sunset" will we linked to both season and place, "seven o'clock" is an abstract time-concept which permits planning and ordering of events over indefinite distances. Thus, this separation permits the time-space "zoning" of social life which is a precondition for the modern mode of social organisation.[38]

Closely connected to the time-space separation is the *disembedding* of social systems, meaning the "'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space".[39] There

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[36]Ibid. p 1.
[37]Ibid. p 3.
[38]Ibid. p 18.
[39]Ibid. p 21.

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are several disembedding mechanisms intrinsically related to the development of modern social institutions, one of them being *symbolic tokens*, or "media of interchange which can be "passed around" without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them at any particular juncture",[40] such as for instance money. An equally important disembedding mechanism is, according to Giddens, *expert systems*, or "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today".[41]

An obvious consequence of both the time-space separation and the disembedding of social systems is a mode of social organisation where the individual to a large degree is unable to control the preconditions for his or her own way of life. Modern society is therefore preconditioned by a considerable amount of generalised *trust* in its capacity to work in order to be able to work. When it *does* work, modern society is, due to its time-space separation and disembeddedness, more flexible and dynamic than any other known mode of social organisation; *change* becomes its most central characteristic, and *adaptability to change* its most central advantage.

An other and equally important consequence of the time-space separation and the disembedding of social systems for modernity is the inherently *globalising* character they provide it with.

> In the modern era, the level of time-space distanciation is much higher than in any previous period, and the relations between local and distant social forms and events become correspondingly "stretched". Globalisation refers essentially to that stretching process, in so far as the modes of connection between different social contexts or regions become networked across the earth's surface as a whole.[42]

Giddens *describes* the globalisation of modernity, rather than explaining it in terms of — as Gellner do — "our" way of thinking being superior to that of non-Western cultures, or — as Ahmed do — the Western culture corrupting other cultures through its imperialism. It is Giddens' use of a virtual definition of modernity rather than a definition which refers to it as a particular philosophy or state of mind which enables him to constructively deal with the idea that modernity is both an inherently *changing* and *expanding* phenomenon. Using this idea as platform, he is furthermore able to handle the problem that modern society, which very basis is rational thought, increasingly has taken on an "irrational" appearance:

According to Giddens, the inherent dynamism of the modern mode of social organisation has accelerated the pace and scope of change as modern society has

[40]Ibid. p 22.
[41]Ibid. p 26.
[42]Ibid. p 64.

matured. Since one, as discussed earlier, because of social development's reflexive nature cannot predict its consequences, this acceleration of change has lead to an increasing number of *unintended consequences*, like for instance the threat of nuclear war or the huge environmental problems we currently are facing. Unlike Gellner, Giddens therefore both recognises and accounts for the fact that the contemporary modern world is not like in its early period tidy, rational and ordered. He rather tends to support Ahmed's view on the current state of affairs when saying that

> The disorientation which expresses itself in the feeling that systematic knowledge about social organisation cannot be obtained (...) results primarily from the sense many of us have of being caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seems in large part outside our control.[43]

Unlike Ahmed, Giddens is, however, not obliged by his definition of modernity to define this state as un-modern, or rather, *post-modern*. On the contrary, he argues that it is an inherent and logical consequence of the nature of modernity:

As we saw from the earlier quoted definition, Giddens relates the origin of modernity to the European period of Enlightenment. What characterised the Enlightenment, as Gellner informed us earlier, was a conversion from belief in God to belief in human reason. Initially, this merely meant a change of fundament for certainty from divine revelation to rational empirical observation. However, the Enlightenment secularisation of truth came to get grave long-term consequences, since the very radical reflexivity that is a precondition for rationality unfortunately at the same time has proved to be the hangman of the idea that the human rational mind can ever be the source of certain knowledge.

> If the sphere of reason is wholly unfettered, no knowledge can rest upon an un-questioned foundation, because even the most firmly held notions can only be regarded as valid "in principle" or "until further notice". Otherwise they would relapse into dogma and become separable from the very sphere of reason which determines what validity is in the first place.[44]

Thus, the current state of disillusionment with rationality, science, the future, and most other things which many social scientists today choose to term *postmodern*, is actually the inherent and unavoidable consequence of the initial illusion on which modernity is built; that human reason can produce certain knowledge. Rather than being beyond modernity, the current state is therefore actually thoroughly modern of nature, it is "modernity coming to understand itself".[45] In spite of the fact that the main objective of the modern project has been to produce

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[43]Ibid. p 2-3.

[44]Ibid. p 48-49.

[45]Ibid. p 48.

and accumulate exactly certain knowledge, we are, in other words, currently less certain about most things than ever before in the modern period. The modern project thus seems to approach its logical end; Giddens is fairly optimistic when he considers what may come after, in the *real* postmodern era. This utopian side of his is, however, not the concern of this article, and will not be discussed further here.

Let us instead turn to Giddens' potential for understanding the relationship between modernity and *Islamic fundamentalism*, which should be seen in connection with his perception of modernity as a globalising phenomenon. For a start, let us examine in full the argument of Giddens' which Ahmed chose to quote only partly (see page 10):

> Two distinct organisational complexes are of particular significance in the development of modernity: the nation-state and systematic capitalist production (...) *Is modernity distinctively a Western project* in terms of the ways of life fostered by these two great transformative agencies? To this query, the blunt answer must be *"yes"*.[46] (italics are mine, and mark Ahmed's quote)

Ahmed's selective reading becomes even clearer when we see the continuation of Giddens' argument, which he completely ignores:

> Is modernity peculiarly Western from the standpoint of its globalising capacities? No. It cannot be, since we are speaking here of emergent forms of world interdependence and planetary consciousness. The ways in which these issues are approached and coped with, however, will inevitably involve conceptions and strategies derived from non-Western settings. For neither the radicalising of modernity nor the globalising of social life are processes which are in any sense complete. Many kinds of cultural response to such institutions are possible, given world cultural diversity as a whole.[47]

Giddens' understanding of modernity's globalising nature is evidently incompatible with both Ahmed's fundamental belief in a dualistic world and Gellner's fundamental belief in a superior and unique way of thinking. There are two reasons for this incompatibility: Giddens' relativism, and his descriptive, institutionalist analysis of modernity which is based on it. If we try out Giddens' theory on Islamic fundamentalism, the background for this incompatibility may become clearer:

As discussed earlier, Giddens regards the *time-space separation* and the *disembedding* of social systems to be the sources of modernity's dynamic and globalising nature. If we regard these two sources from another angle, they come to constitute what one may call a descriptive "check-list" for identifying modernity. One may on the basis of this check-list pose questions like (on the

[46]Ibid. p 174-175.
[47]Ibid. p 175.

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most banal level) "do Islamic fundamentalists use watches?" or "do they want to ban the use of money?". The answer to the first question would be yes, and to the second, no, and the conclusion of this little study would be that Islamic fundamentalism is modern, but that is not the main point here. What is important, is that Giddens approaches modernity in a way that makes him able to avoid the central problems of both Gellner and Ahmed, problems they are doomed to struggle with because of their fundamentalist points of departure. Through his descriptive, institutional analysis of modernity he elevates the discussion above the level of cultural or philosophical likes and dislikes, and it is his relativist standpoint that enables him to do this.

The advantage of Giddens' approach to understanding modernity — *and* its relationship to Islamic fundamentalism — is particularly evident in the above quote. Unlike both Gellner and Ahmed, he evidently has no problems with integrating "conceptions and strategies derived from non-Western settings" as well as "many kinds of cultural response" to modern institutions in his perception of modernity. To return to our little example: Islamic fundamentalists using watches will, according to Giddens, be modern, but it is their choice of strategy to integrating the use of watches in their culture that will decide whether they become "Westernised" or stay "Muslim" — or become "Islamic", if that is what they wish. Giddens' approach to modernity leads beyond the swamp of normative views on cultural imperialism or societal superiority in which far too many of the attempts at understanding this vast and ever changing phenomenon have stranded; this is his big advantage, and the reason why he deserves attention from students of modernity in general and its global expansion in particular.

Conclusion

Ernest Gellner, Akbar Ahmed, and Anthony Giddens are representatives of three central theoretical traditions concerned with understanding the nature and consequences of modernity. This comparative analysis of their contributions has illuminated a number of aspects involved in the study of modernity. One of them is that there is no "right" definition of this phenomenon. A multitude of definitions are possible, and each of them will contain some truth about the nature of modernity. We have, however, seen that one's choice between the definitions will precondition in a fundamental way the scope of conclusions at one's disposal. Therefore, the lack of "rights" and "wrongs" when it comes to understandings of modernity does not imply that the way in which it is defined is not important.

Neither does this lack of one "right" perception of modernity imply that the choice between definitions may be guided merely by likes and dislikes, or that there are no standards for assessing the quality of studies of the phenomenon. *Fruitfulness* is an equally if not more valid means of evaluating social scientific analyses as "truth", and in the context of modernity it is an obvious and highly useful

standard. We have seen that Giddens, through his separation of *modern institutions* and *culture*, offers a frame for more fruitful and constructive analyses of both modernity in general and its relationship to Islamic fundamentalism in particular than either Gellner and Ahmed, and it is my assertion that it is his lack of fundamentalist belief — be it methodological or substantive — that has provided him with this advantageous position.