



Ralph Schroeder*

Social Thought from the Global South: A Comparative-Historical View from Xi's China and Modi's India

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Abstract: It has been argued that social thought is Western-centric or Euro-centric. This essay argues that there are alternatives that have been put forward from the Global South, though they have been overlooked. Examples can be found in the different schools of thought about development that have emerged in India and China. Non-Western social thought in these two countries borrows from – but also departs from – that in the West, and includes versions of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism. These schools of thought also blur, as do Western ones, academic theories, political ideologies, and models of societal development. This essay will briefly present these schools, but the aim is not to detail them but rather to spell out their implications. These implications include that they do not map easily onto the Western left-right divide. Further, these schools illuminate how forms of inclusion and exclusion have been shaped by the state's responses to distinctive pressures “from below.” In the conclusion, the essay discusses how these schools offer models for other parts of the Global South and hold a mirror up to the West.

Keywords: China, India, social theory, global south, multiple modernities

1 Introduction

The problem that social thought is Western-centric or Euro-centric is widely acknowledged. As Chakrabarty (2000, 6) has argued, the narrative of “first in the west, then elsewhere” needs to be challenged. However, attempts to correct Western-centrism or Euro-centrism often consist of merely criticizing theories rather than putting forward substantive alternatives. This essay presents a number of such alternatives from the Global South, focusing on two countries that are often seen as potential so-called models; India and China. If it seems odd to consider China as part of the global South, it is worth remembering that China's GDP only

*Corresponding author: **Ralph Schroeder**, Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford OX1 3JS, UK, E-mail: ralph.schroeder@oii.ox.ac.uk. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4229-1585>

surpassed India's in 1991 (Bardhan 2010). Nowadays, China is nevertheless often seen in the Global South as an economic success story that should be emulated, just as India has been seen as a model for democratization. Even if the two cases are not seen as models for other countries in the Global South, and whatever their performance, the social thought from both systems has served as a blueprint or roadmap for the distinctive developmental trajectories of the two countries (Huang 2012). Moreover, as this essay will argue in the conclusion, they offer valuable lessons for the West or the Global North.

The essay will proceed as follows: first, it will clarify the relation between social thought, political ideology, and models of development, as well as their support among intellectual strata and among wider publics. Next, it will sketch the main schools of social thought in the two countries, focusing on what makes them distinctively "southern." As we shall see, there are uniquely Indian and Chinese versions of socialism, liberalism, and conservatism, but these three labels do not fully capture or exhaust the thinking about the societal development in the two countries. Different strands of social thought can be mixed of course, and they also have different kinds of public support, depending in part on the status and role of intellectuals in the two societies. In the conclusion, the essay spells out which schools of social thought are currently most prominent under Modi and Xi, with implications for the Global South and for current challenges to democracies in the West or the Global North.

2 Social Thought, Political Ideology, and Models of Development

Before embarking on this account, it is necessary briefly to disentangle the relation between social thought and various other ways of thinking about societal development. Social thought or social theory can be seen as an interpretation of the past, present, and possible futures of societies. Social thought can also be useful for the advance of social scientific knowledge or for policymaking. In some cases, it is more academic, in other cases more public-facing, and in yet others it is the basis for political mobilization or the legitimization of governments. The difficult question of the accuracy or otherwise of social theories can be sidestepped here: accuracy pertains to social scientific knowledge, but there is little by way of consensus in social science. And so in this essay, the accuracy or otherwise of social thought will not be prejudged, but we will need to examine how these schools of thought have been used and which strata they are carried by at various points, and also come back to the question of their validity in the conclusion.

Schools of social thought can thus be seen as systematized bodies of ideas which may or not fit with the evidence in scientific knowledge, but they are also “carried” by certain intellectual strata; they are not free-floating. Political ideologies or models of development, in contrast, are typically “package deals” that appeal to voters and publics and to policymakers, they are political programs but they can also be rather remote from evidence. Ideas, as Weber (see esp. 1978, 515–17) noted, need carrier strata that systematize them. These “carrier strata,” in this case both inside and outside of academia, and regardless of the validity of these systematized bodies of thought, promote rival ideas to guide social development, especially regarding the role of the state in the economy. What follows is therefore not a history of ideas; these schools of thought are rooted in the social histories of the two countries and promoted by various elites or “carriers” which, in turn, anchor them in the support for various rival schools “from below.” In other words, schools of social thought need to fit to some extent with interpretations of realities on the ground, even if they also make of sense of them as well as challenge them, and they need carrier strata. For our purposes then, they need to meet three criteria; they must be:

- Coherent systems of thought;
- Sufficiently distinct from others; and
- Supported among “carrier” strata and in civil society.

Again, in the conclusion, we will come back to how social thought can be distinguished from political ideologies and models of development. But there is widespread agreement on the idea of analyzing thought in context, whether in conceptual analyses of ideologies (Freeden 1996), social histories of “communities of discourse” (Wuthnow 2009), or efforts to include non-Western thought in global theory (Jenco 2016). Freeden and Wuthnow also agree that socialism, liberalism, and conservatism are the three main strands of modern Western thought. We shall see that these reappear in the Indian and Chinese contexts, yet also much changed and distinctively “southern.” While distinct, Southern social thought thus has admixtures of Western ideas.

Social thought and political ideologies often contain disparate elements with various degrees of formalization and coherence. Social thought within academia furthermore consists of more technical or philosophical ideas that relate to quite abstract ideas about society or specific aspects of societal development. These include systems theories, for example, or intersectionality – but these are either too formal or too specific to capture broad societal development. They do not provide maps of distinctive paths of societal development, though the distinction is not always hard and fast, as with “modernization” (derived from systems theory) or when social movements promote identities (related to intersectionality). Social

thought also encompasses a variety of disciplines. As Meghji (2021, 84) has argued in the case of sociology, moving away from Western-centric thought should “start including thinkers who hitherto have not been considered sociologists.” The same could, of course, be said for academic disciplines apart from sociology and for social thinkers outside of academia.

In any event, the schools of social thought described here fall outside of the dominant ideas derived from high-income democracies because they pertain to an authoritarian party-state in the case of China and a half-democracy (Varshney 2013) in the case of India. But they also challenge the global hierarchy in which liberal democracies with Western characteristics are seen as the apex of development. This challenge applies not just to Modi’s campaign to revive Hindu civilization or to the reawakening of Confucian culture under Xi. Various liberalizing ideas and left traditions also challenge global hierarchies. Moreover, challenges to global hierarchies also seek legitimacy beyond the borders of the two countries; in other words, they now go beyond earlier nationalist independence struggles and aim to provide wider models of development.

One final preliminary point is needed: in China, the dominant strand in social thought has been promoted by a propaganda apparatus, the workings of which are incompletely known (but see Brady 2009; McGregor 2010). The propaganda department as an institution is responsible for maintaining the dominance of the thought of the party leadership. As we shall see, however, there are (limited) rivalries within the party and intellectual currents outside of this apparatus. And while Xi has strengthened the role of the propaganda department, it had had a lesser role during previous administrations. In India, the institutional bases of social thought include the universities, currently under attack by Modi’s government but nevertheless still an outpost of challenges to his dominance. But there also the campaign organizations of the parties (see Sharma 2020) and many independent think tanks and NGOs. And Modi has also tried to present himself as a guru in the manner of a religious figures in the past, a figure that would have been easily recognizable in Weber’s sociology of religion. The different institutional bases for different intellectual carrier strata and their strengths and weaknesses is another aspect we shall need to return to in the conclusion.

3 Strands of Social Thought in China and in India

The Southern schools of thought that will be sketched here cannot be found in a pure form and they are often entwined with each other and with other strands of thinking. But they depart from Western theories of modernization and define distinctive developmental trajectories. Briefly, the main schools of thought in India

are Nehruvian statist socialism, Gandhian anti-materialism, and village-centrism, a secularizing liberalism, and Modi's populist ultranationalism or Hindutva. In China, the main strands are revivals of Maoism, Confucianism, and a Chinese liberalism with universal aspirations. Cheek labels them "liberals, New Left, and New Confucians" (2015, 269). The New Left is based on Marxist–Leninism but also on Maoism which used to center on peasants but now aims to put the working class first against growing capitalist inequalities. Confucian meritocratic thought has experienced a revival and mixes uneasily with a "China first" ultranationalism. In both India and China, these various theories of development are carried by different elites and have support among different parts of civil society. To this must be added that in China, civil society is not autonomous from the state and so the developmental alternatives are not openly championed. They can be expressed only to the extent that they fit with – or are kept within the bounds permitted by – the party-state; intellectuals, says Cheek, operate in a "directed public sphere" (2015, 9). And, as mentioned, the party-state shapes the type of social thought that is allowed.

In India the various strands of social thought have had to address caste and religion. As Bayly points out, India is both "the world's largest democracy and its most elaborate system of positive discrimination" (2018, 77). The system of reservations came into force with the constitution which enshrined a differentiated set of social citizenship rights – in this case, related to belonging to religious communities but grounded in the secularism of a state that sought to ignore rather than do away with caste and religion. Reservations can be seen as a socialist egalitarian project or as part of Ambedkar's championing of the disenfranchised and as an attempt to overcome religious hierarchies and divisions. But new party-based divides have also emerged over reservations which do not fall neatly into the thinking during the founding of the republic, and social thought still struggles with reservations and with religion in India.

So, for example, Kapila (2014, 267) says that while "the "social" and its uplift became the "political" foundation of Indian democracy and its constitution"; as one of the prime authors of the constitution, Ambedkar sought to "institutionalize social strife and set it into a competitive framework through affirmative action" (2014, 269). Bajpai, however, places Ambedkar squarely in a distinctive Indian tradition of radical liberalism which emphasizes positive freedom over negative freedom: Ambedkar and other makers of the constitution were "ahead of the theory and practice of liberalism of their time ... instituting legislative quotas and preferential treatment in government employment for downtrodden castes and tribes" (2019, 500). But although the system of reservations has become more systematized and strengthened over time, especially with the Mandal Commission in the 1990s, it has also become increasingly contested, and recently overshadowed by the populist politics of Hindutva.

Modi's Hindutva worldview has been informed by the ultranationalist thought of Savarkar, which borrowed from fascism (Jaffrelot 2016). Hindutva is anti-Muslim, but arguably Modi is also trying to replace caste reservations by targeting economic redistribution at those with the greatest need – or where he has the greatest potential for gaining votes. Nehru, in contrast, championed religious and linguistic pluralism, but his fondness of central planning owed much to his admiration for the Soviet Union. As Brown notes, Nehru's ideas for a planned economy, themselves the product of the influence of Fabian socialism and his visit to the Soviet Union in 1927, were part of a "broad international intellectual consensus around mid-century" (2003, 239). The vision of a planned economy was never implemented, but as we shall see, its centralizing impulse still guides economic thinking about a self-sufficient India.

Nehru and Gandhi famously disagreed about societal development; one championed state-led industrialization and the other self-sufficient village life. The key difference between Nehru's and Gandhi's thought on development, as Naseemullah notes, was that Gandhi mistrusted the state (2017, 238, 240). Van der Veer also points out that "Gandhi largely operated from outside of the Congress Party, projecting himself as a moral exemplar above politics" (2014, 216). This tradition lives on with Modi, who advertises himself as a spiritual figure inheriting the mantle of Gandhi's thought. And there is another sense in which Modi claims to be Gandhi's heir: Gandhi's notion of self-sufficiency (*swadeshi*) rejected Western materialism. This anti-materialism was also part of the BJP's earlier economic thinking, but under Modi, it has come to mean harnessing business in the service of economic nationalism (Naseemullah 2017).

India's dominant economic thinking has never fully embraced negative liberty and the free market. As Bayly notes, "liberalism in India had never been as devoted to individualism or the market as its Anglo-Saxon equivalent. Instead, it had tended to be polarized between statist and communitarian versions of liberalism" (2012, 354–55). And liberalism generally is no longer as central as it once was – indeed, perhaps it was in its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s and it has become "endangered" since the rise of the BJP (Guha 2001). Still, it has left a lasting legacy in India (Bayly 2012, 357). And Manor points out that with Modi, "the economic order has become less liberal – or neoliberal – than before he took power"; he has engaged in a "radical centralization of power in pursuit of top-down control" (2020, 12, 14).

This centralizing thrust has come at the expense of local democracy. Gandhi's "localism" importantly shaped India village level "panchayat" self-government (for example, Guha 2007, 670–72), to which can be added Gandhi's anti-industrial ideas about a "village-centred economic order" (Guha 2006, 82). But Gandhi's "ideals of decentralization, simplicity and sacrifice had remarkably little purchase in independent India" (Bayly 2012, 351), even if, as we have seen, the spiritual

dimension of his thought has left a lasting imprint on Indian social thought. But Modi's political project perhaps reflects nothing so much as the aspirations of a rising middle class and of Hindus – hence its majoritarianism. And, to anticipate, this part of his project may have broader implications: Chatterjee (2020, xvi) argues that “many features of Indian populism are likely to reappear in the liberal democracies of the West,” including acclamation for a leader who can allegedly champion “subalterns” without the need to be bound by “institutional norms.”

In China, the reforms towards a market-driven society were to a large extent pragmatically rather than ideologically motivated, as in Deng's famous “cat theory”: “it doesn't matter if the cat is black or white as long as it catches the mouse” (Vogel 2011, 391). Of course this pragmatism, especially against the backdrop of Mao's Leninist idea of the party as vanguard, is also ideological: an embrace of market-centeredness rather than statist control. But Deng also believed in meritocracy (Vogel 2011, 701–3) and a system whereby a virtuous elite leads the country. This way of thinking has also been associated, as mentioned, with a revival of Confucianism. Chan (2014) has put forward a philosophical justification of Confucian political perfectionism, whereby the ruler seeks the moral common good of the people. And Daniel Bell has taken Confucian ideas further in developing the argument that a meritocratically selected party elite which seeks to improve society – especially for its most disadvantaged members – constitutes a plausible model which is in certain respects superior to Western models of development. Bell and Wang argue that in recent decades, “there has been a serious effort to (re)establish political meritocracy” (2020, 72), moving away from Mao's class-based rule and towards earlier Confucian and Legalist traditions. But as Li (2015, 39) points out, such China's neo-authoritarians or neo-conservatives are not simply out to justify the status quo; they actively seek to give more control to a meritocracy in order to ensure political stability that can avoid dangerous demands by the masses, including demands for liberal democracy. So again, meritocratic thought can be seen as an ideological veneer for party leadership; in this case on the basis of “virtue” rather than ‘scientific socialism.’

Rivalling Confucian meritocratic thinking but especially against the shift to what is seen as ruthless capitalism under the guise of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ are several strands of the Chinese New Left, associated with thinkers like Wang Hui (see Keucheyan 2014, 128–34). They draw both on Western Marxism but also on Mao's thought. Importantly, this thinking claims continuities with the early period of Communist rule when Mao's thinking was dominant and it seeks to revive his emphasis on class struggle. Yang (2016) sees a continuity from the cultural revolution to present-day “red culture” in political activism that tries to keep the spirit of Maoist revolution alive, also on a more national level than Bo Xilai's ill-fated attempt to do so with the so-called Chongqing model (see also

Blanchette 2019). This project comes not only from the party but also, as Veg (2019) has documented, from “grassroots intellectuals” (*minjian*). These intellectuals have become increasingly prominent in recent decades, especially in the online public arena, speaking for ‘silent majorities’ or dis-privileged subalterns and they do not align either with the state or with consumerism. But again, this tradition can represent itself as continuous with “red culture.” And these efforts may be “local” or in any case disparate, but in the case of China they also contribute to a state-independent civil society “from below”; though with what success, as Veg acknowledges, remains to be seen.

Liberals in China seek more independence for civil society. But the liberalism of Xu, for example, one its most prominent representatives, also seeks to counteract the moral decay that he observes in contemporary China. Xu wants to build on China’s historical culture and champion its civil religion amidst a broader de-centered and non-hierarchical “universal civilization” in which there is no “other” (2018, 19, 127–54) and which pursues “good democracy,” a “democracy that can guarantee man’s free nature”(2018, 37). But as in India, liberalism is currently the weakest strand of social thought; according to Cheek, liberalism is “currently muted” (2015, 327). Still, Xu’s liberalism with its universal aspirations can be seen as a distinctively “Southern” strand of social thought since he sees China as a potential model for the world, as do the Confucians and New Leftists. And one distinctive feature of liberalism from the Global South, in China as in India, is that liberals have to wrestle with how to make their societies compatible with democracy and modernity.

One strand of leftism that has been developed in relation to the Global South, though it is also difficult to pigeonhole as left-wing, is subaltern studies. Subaltern studies are in a Gramscian tradition, regarding forces from below as sources of challenges to hegemony (Ganguly 2015). In China, subaltern studies has been less prominent, mainly tied to championing Asia-wide connections across borders (for example, Sun Ge 2020). But it has mainly been prominent in Indian humanities and cultural studies, where it also takes the form of the wider postcolonial theorizing. Yet there is a disconnect between postcolonialism and subaltern studies in Western universities as against its prominence among leading thinkers in China and India: In the West, postcolonialism is focused on high culture, literature, humanities, and epistemology, whereas in India and China, intellectuals seek to guide economic and political development. And while postcolonial theories reject “Western” scientific epistemologies, China’s and India’s leaders eagerly embrace techno-scientific innovation as a route to global leadership. As Ownby puts it, “Western postmodernists emphasize the difficulties of knowing the world in an effort to problematize and move beyond modernity, while Chinese intellectuals trust in the knowability of the world in the hopes of advancing China’s interests” (2018,

xvii). More broadly, Jansen and Osterhammel say that, “in contrast to the thinking of the decolonization era,” when anti-colonial ideology was at its height, “post-colonialism has essentially remained an academic phenomenon” (2017, 169–70).

4 Shifting Histories

Against this background, we can briefly turn to how, in both countries, the interpretation of history has been used in legitimating contemporary social thought. A nationalist anti-colonial interpretation clearly contributed to the independence movement in India as did the war against the Japanese in the Chinese case. But recent nationalist assertions depart from this earlier form, asserting not just independent nationhood but also a “my country first” nationalism. Zhao calls this “ultranationalism” which, he says “leads to a devaluing of and aggression towards the “they group” (2004, 253). In India, such ultranationalist historical narratives, according to Guha, are emerging from under the shadow of the nation-building Nehruvian historical narrative (2019, 170). So, for example, Sarkar describes how the writing and teaching of history in India has in recent years increasingly become a tool for BJP propaganda, idealizing a Hindu past. “Left-secular historians,” meanwhile, who “make up the bulk of Indian historians ... have, with few exceptions, confined their work to the realm of the properly academic ... that realm, however, inevitably belongs to metropolitan centers and to highly educated middle-class academic circles” (Sarkar 2019, 172).

Devji, however, has noted a key difference between how the imperial past is mobilized in the two countries. It is worth quoting him at length: China “very deliberately identifies with the entirety of its imperial history, not excluding the many instances of it in which the country was ruled by non-Han dynasties. This allows Chinese policymakers to literally inherit the borders and traditions of their imperial past and deploy both strategically. India, on the other hand, refuses to inherit large chunks of its own imperial history, especially that attributed to “foreign” and more particularly Muslim rule, and ... possesses no continuous history in the mind of its own policymakers ... and so cannot deploy the past for any political project except in internally divisive ways” (2020, 114). Put more crudely, China’s past lends itself to a more cohesive narrative while India’s is bound to remain more contested. This is a good place to add that, one tradition for India that has been left out for reasons of space is Islamic political thought, which has shaped Indian society from at least the time of the Mughal empire and through the Muslim League in the 20th century and continues into the present, even as it has become embattled under Modi’s government (but see Kapila 2021, esp. 194–228). Nehru, in contrast with Modi, certainly sought a more encompassing view of India’s past.

But interpretations of the past have also shifted. In China, history used to focus on Mao's heroic struggle to liberate the nation, from the Long March in the mid-1930s and into his communist "successes" during the early republic. Yet Mitter (2020) has argued that in recent years, a reinterpretation of China's role during the post-war period has been under way. China's role, historians now say, in views endorsed by Xi, was to co-create a peaceful international order alongside its Western allies. How this order is upheld now is mainly threatened by a dysfunctional US. There is of course much idealization in this view of history, as Mitter points out, but since China is a rising economic power "the world will have to pay more attention to the stories it wants to tell" (2020, 261). In other words, the past is being retrofitted to China's ascent in becoming a global power and the benign role it can play as such. Xi's ambitions go beyond the recent past and even the 19th "century of humiliation" in this respect; he wants a rethinking of the whole of China's history towards restoring its benevolent role at the center of the world and in contrast with its more belligerent Western competitors: this can legitimate China's current "rightful rise."

5 Carrier Strata

In China, academics play a particularly important role in interpreting China's role in the world: "China's intellectual public sphere includes journalists, business leaders speaking on social and political issues, some artists, local nongovernmental organizations, lawyers, and other social activists. All are important ... but these actors generally focus on specific issues, particular communities, and individual cases ... Academic public intellectuals address their attention to the discursive sinews of power in the CCP's China – ideology and 'China's story'" (Cheek, Ownby, and Fogel 2020, 10). In earlier times, China's top leadership, its nation-builders, used to be engineers. Andreas (2009) has described how they dominated the top echelons of the party in the post-war period, particularly centered on Tsinghua University. He followed their twists and turns during the Cultural Revolution. But in recent decades, the background among the top leadership has changed; nowadays, they are more likely to have received MBAs from America's top business schools.

In India, too, the highest status has been accorded to those with an engineering education, in this case at the extremely selective Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT). Again, engineering was associated with nation-building during the Congress era, but in recent decades IIT graduates have shunned the public sector and become leaders in the IT sector of private industry (Subramanian 2019). Yet in India, an IIT education is still regarded as the highest status qualification among the elite. But

while engineers continue to be at the apex of the professional status hierarchy, they now prioritize business efficiency over corrupt party politics (Sharma 2020).

Indian academics, meanwhile, remain entrenched in their traditional strongholds, the universities and the media, but these are now being progressively undermined by the Modi government. As we saw earlier, the heyday of liberal – and, it can be added, Marxist – intellectuals was in the 1950s and '60s. But their influence has since declined, which Anderson links to their inability to take a clear stance on religion. Their weakness, he says, relates to “the tensions of the relation of so many intellectuals to the traditional faith surrounding them. Even for non-believers in the ranks of Congress, once religion had fused with the nation in the independence struggle, to demystify the one was to damage the other” (2013, 172). In this way, a fractious history concerning religion has left an opening for those who wish to reinterpret India’s development in ultranationalist terms.

6 Contesting Currents

In India the main competition is now between a subdued liberalism, mainly among intellectuals and in civil society (including the courts), the legacies of socialism in Congress (and in regional communist parties), and Modi’s Hindutva. The Gandhian tradition of non-violence and village-centrism also persists. Thapar (2020), for example, finds the protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 drawing on Gandhian legacies, protests that were mainly peopled by Muslim women in their stronghold in Delhi. Likewise with the ongoing farmers’ protests against the Modi government’s farms acts of 2020. Van der Veer says that Gandhi’s “spiritual nationalism” (2014, 50) is more deeply anchored in Indian society than spiritualism in China because “India’s traditions were resources in the anti-imperialist struggle against a material civilization that culturally and politically subjected India to Western power” (2014, 61). Modi’s populism also draws on this civilizational appeal, but his electoral politics are shaped more crudely by Hindu ultranationalism.

In China, it may be hard to gauge the dominant strands of thought informing Xi’s policies. Most of the leading cadres receive an education in Marxist–Leninist and Maoist thought, and Pieke (2009) has provided an account of how training in communist ideology takes place. But when Shi-Kupfer et al. (2016) tried to map the various contending ideological camps among urban elites, they actually found several, including “traditionalists,” “Mao Lovers,” “market lovers,” “humanists” (or globalists), “democratizers,” “flag wavers” (or nationalists), “party warriors” (defenders of the party) and those advocating “equality” (the New Left, mentioned earlier). These roughly map onto some of the distinct strands identified by Cheek and

others among intellectuals. There is also factionalism within the party, often based in regional parties (see McGregor 2010; Dickson 2021). Further, these carrier strata have support in civil society, which Palmer (2019) describes in terms of its moral codes, where there are those favoring the “revolutionary heritage” and others morals “derived from Chinese tradition.” These two have partly entwined and become stronger after 1989 while a third, “liberal” constituent of civil society based on Western modernity, has clearly receded under Xi Jinping (Palmer 2019, 136–37).

Both countries currently contain a variety of competing political factions and intellectual currents. Modi’s populism is reshaping Indian politics according to Hindutva exclusivism, but the BJP has competition from Congress and other regional parties. Xi Jinping Thought is being strongly promoted and seeks to strengthen the party-state’s authoritarianism, and it has an institutional base in the central propaganda apparatus. But although the competition from Bo Xilai’s “red guard” rival power center was quashed in Chongqing (Blanchette 2019, 104–26), it has not been entirely vanquished. The paths and schools of social thought mapped here thus do not fit easily with the divide between left and right in Western democracies, especially in relation to economic development and the role of culture in guiding the state. For example, in China, leftist Maoism can be seen as “conservative” while in India, Modi mixes a right-wing push for markets with left-wing economic nationalism. And in both cases, the re-assertion of culture (Hindutva and Confucianism) does not sit easily with conservatism since it also continues in the anti-colonialist vein in India and seeks to overcome the century of humiliation in China.

“Conservative” ultranationalism comes with somewhat different Chinese (moral-civilizational) and Indian (religious) characteristics, though there are also similarities inasmuch as both want the nation to preserve and strengthen its traditional culture. Note, however, that there are bottom-up and top-down versions: some, like Gandhi with his emphasis on local self-government and self-sufficiency but also Modi’s anti-elitism, are bottom-up, though before Modi, the BJP and Hindutva were more top-down and favored Brahmin paternalism. In China, too, there are more “grassroots” and elite-centric “meritocratic” versions of Confucianism. And likewise liberalism and leftism, too, can put more emphasis on civil society or on top-down elitism.

To come back to ultranationalism for a moment, again, it is worth emphasizing that this thinking is not simply conservative since the aim is to transform society by reviving a certain culture. Nor is it simply authoritarian since it has electoral (India) and mass mobilization (China) support. Van der Veer says that “mass mobilization ... for the transformation of self and society has a central place both in Chinese religion and in Maoism” (Van der Veer 2014, 153). And Tang (2016) describes these currents in the post-war period as populist

authoritarianism, which can mobilize the “grassroots” on the Maoist left but now also the ultranationalist right. Yet in both cases, ultranationalist currents are reactionary in the sense that they are directed against a multicultural left which seeks greater inclusion. Hindutva wants more exclusive citizenship for Hindus and Confucians want more “patriotic” citizenship in China – both are reactionary if the modern pattern of political development is regarded as a progressively more inclusive and deeper form of citizenship for all. (It can be mentioned that historical debates about the inclusiveness or otherwise of ancient Hindu and Confucian cultures in pre-modern times continue, though they are outside the scope of this essay. But as we have seen, the efforts at mythologizing the past can be contested, also since both China and India were dominated for many centuries by Buddhism. Hence while some advocates of Confucianism and Hindutva are exclusivist, this is not inherent in their moral or religious codes).

The schools of social thought in both cases also misrepresent some of the main thrusts of social development: China is not capitalist or neoliberal, as is sometimes argued; it is a market society engaging in “grand steering,” as Naughton (2020) puts it, investing in certain high technology sectors via indirect government control of the financial system. None of the schools of thought described here capture this. But then, none of the schools of thought capture Modi’s populism or his high-tech ambitions. And while Modi’s increasing control of the economy could be seen as a continuation of Nehruvian planning, ideologically Modi has set himself apart from previous Congress state socialist thinking. Instead, he promotes economic nationalism, drawing on but also bowdlerizing Gandhian ideas combined with Hindutva. In short, there are often gaps between theories and practices.

7 The Uses and Abuses of Social Thought

All this can be put differently: as mentioned at the outset, social thought has various uses, and fit with evidence is one of them. Yet history can be mythologized, as we have seen. But two things can be true at the same time: that social thought can be based on myths or ideological constructions of the present, and that it can correspond partly to the realities of past and present social development. Both can be used to shape it. The fit between myth and reality goes beyond the scope of this essay, but we have seen, for example, that state control of the economy, which is extensive in both countries, sits uneasily with the profession of open competitive market-driven economies that Xi and Modi say they are pursuing. Or again, the pluralist tolerance of religious and ethnic minorities that Xi and Modi advocate in theory does not square with realities on the ground (in Xi’s case, the Uighurs are an

obvious exception, but so too is religious pluralism). But the ideas that promote open markets or pluralism do not square with statist ideas of economic development either. Instead, the statism in the Chinese and Indian models to some extent fits the late developmental state model (Lange 2015) espoused in East Asia and other parts of the global South.

It can be added that “Northern” social thought also often does not fit with the facts either; the infrastructural control of certain large economic sectors being one example. But so too are the developmental models that the West or rich countries have prescribed for poor ones: As Chang (2002) has argued, their prescriptions have often departed from the paths they themselves pursued, and have since then misconstrued. These gaps or misconceptions may be obvious, but identifying them in terms of the distinctiveness of Southern social thought crystallizes the range of options being considered for shaping the future course of societies. At the same time, thinkers who insist on exceptionalism – in other words, that their course of societies does not fit the mold of any models – have overlooked that all modern states require legitimacy whereby states and their ruling elites must be responsive to their citizens or civil societies, which are diverse.

In the case of India’s decolonizing struggle, Nehruvian state socialism and Hindutva ultranationalism but also liberal secular constitutional thought have guided development. In China, Maoist mobilization of grass roots but also a revival of Confucian ethics and a Chinese liberal universalism have all been anchored in popular support. The distinctiveness of these modes of legitimation is not “exceptional”; they are variations on the theme of legitimation with Chinese and Indian “characteristics.” The various paths are in open-ended competition, they are reversible and they consist of an incomplete drive for inclusion of citizens in the state which includes certain legacies and excludes others. With these common elements, they are also similar to the likewise “unexceptional” claims to uniqueness among liberal and social democracies with their inclusions and exclusions.

If it seems that other countries do not harbor this type of exceptionalism or seek ultranationalist forms of legitimacy like Confucianism and Modi’s Hindutva, it can be remembered that the US, for example, has always had its own version of exceptionalism (Lipset 1996). In recent years the most common form this has taken is a white Christian nationalism (better labelled ultranationalism, as argued earlier) that fits the alleged moral decline of America and the loss of its powerful position in the world and seeks “to turn back the tide – the only way to make America great again, if you like – is for Christians to take back the country or to push back hard against its enemies – the liberals, secularists, and humanists who have been taking over” (Gorski 2020, 109). Except that this narrative is not exceptional; it is similar to strands in recent Confucian and Hindu thought – or perhaps more accurately all of these represent a kind of ultranationalist revivalism.

Populism currently dominates in India. In China, Xi's official Maoism is mixed with the legacies of Confucian meritocratic elements. But Xi and Modi also fuse the various ideological strands that they can draw upon in different ways: Xi officially endorses Marxist–Leninist internationalism but he also stresses Chinese characteristics when necessary. Modi pays lip service to the secular Nehruvian tradition while departing from it with his populist ultranationalism. These schools of thought can be interwoven and they point to how India and China offer distinctive non-Western trajectories and future paths for the role of two rising nations in the world and beyond. Liberalism has been in retreat in both countries, but that may change with domestic and geopolitical circumstances. Making explicit these constellations, including how these schools of social thought depart from Western democratic ideals, is an essential starting point for assessing their prospects and predicaments.

8 Conclusions: The Roads Ahead

Again, the social or historical context matters. In both cases, there was a rivalry to lead the “non-aligned world” in the period from Indian independence and the Maoist victory in the late 1940s through to the end of decolonization and then the end of the Cold War. These trajectories have echoes in the present day. But the two powers have come to have more regional aspirations in recent decades. Modernization theory, with its roots in post-war American dominance, can also be contextualized now: it argued for a convergence of development on the model of American-style democracies and market economies. But this model had a number of elements which can now be pried apart: It is true that markets have been embraced by India and China, though with degrees of economic protectionism and an added idea whereby the economy should serve the national good (as with the social market economic ideas of some Western democracies). As for democracy, India has been a model in some ways (large voter turnout, especially among lower strata) but also ample skew towards corrupt elites (as in China, though Xi has tried to counteract this), and India's liberalism is being progressively undermined both institutionally and ideologically. China, of course, seeks a different kind of legitimacy that it regards as democratic, but perhaps the operationalization of how democracy works is best exemplified at the local or regional level. Modern ideas about political participation and citizenship and rights have always been contested rather than “universal,” and they can be and have been revoked – as well as expanded – everywhere.

In the late 19th century, during the heyday of colonialism and imperial competition, there was a strong sense of a hierarchy of cultures and races. While racism in various guises remains, it is no longer tied to such a hierarchy in the

international order, though the idea of cultural competition in the world order remains, including in the idea of the rightful rise of India and China (Miller 2021). And this rightful rise includes an element of moral suasion, of shaping the international order normatively, though there are milder and stronger versions of this. Go's (2021) Bourdieusian analysis divides between the inter-imperial competition until the mid 20th century. Thereafter, he says, there has been a shift to an inter-state system of nation-states in which colonization has become illegitimate.

The schools of thought that have been presented here can be seen as mainly – but not only – addressing national development, and especially the role of the state in the economy. In this regard, there are strong parallels in the three schools: liberals in both countries have the closest affinity to pro-market ideas. “Ultrnationalists” are closest to economic protectionism (with Gandhianism closer to local self-sufficiency than the “buy Indian” of *Hindutva*). And “leftists” aim at egalitarian redistribution, though Nehruvianism owes more to reformist socialist thought while Maoism is more Leninist. This is simplified, and there are overlaps. But one point that is highlighted in this contrast is that the ability to pursue different options for the role of the state in economic development depends on having some degree of autonomous state capacity in the first place, rather than being buffeted by outside economic forces. This autonomy, as Kohli (2022) argues, is characteristic of both post-independence India and independent China as well as of other Asian states, in contrast with Latin American and African ones that are more dependent on outside economic forces.

Go points out that social theories must now conform to this new post-war order in which nation-states decide their own destinies. This is a different order from the order of empires at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries and from the interregnum between the two world wars. Go conceives of these world orders, and the transitions between them, as Bourdieusian fields. But his analysis is close to Mann's (2013, 13–36) account of the post war global order in which some great powers dominate. In Bourdieu's and Go's case, the competition is over both cultural and economic capital; for Mann it is primarily one of geopolitical competition. Both fit India's and China's rise, with the two countries competing in the field or order of declining American and European dominance – though this is too simple since the post – Cold War order is still taking shape.

One lesson from these schools of social thought is that the “rise” of China and India poses no threat in the international order: unlike the peak period of colonialism and imperialism, when, as mentioned, there was a racist and “civilizing” mission among the great powers struggling for preeminence, China's and India's rise is far from having ambitions abroad beyond a regionally dominant role; there is little of the universalizing drive for pole position as among earlier colonial and imperial efforts; the international order has become multipolar with at least three (EU, US, and

China) or more poles. The world order thus continues to be asymmetric but now contains various developmental paths with some of them originating in the global South. The paths taken by Delhi and Beijing will reshape the hierarchy of the world order, especially concerning the relation between states and markets – a central element of the schools of social thought examined here. A second element concerns the extent to which both countries regard their cultures and economies as open or more exclusive. This essay has given an account of the main strands of thought that currently guide societal development, but in this regard Xi's and Modi's governments and their thinking will not be the last word. And it should be remembered that while these schools of thought resonate among some intellectual carrier strata and their supporters, the minds of especially Chinese political leaders may be focused on other more close-to-hand divides in social development such as urban versus rural or the politics of certain regions or dealing with central versus local control.

All this raises a vast question that can be raised but not answered here: these two sets of Southern schools of thought and the support they have received – for India, only half-democratically, and for China without democracy but with most of the populations' acquiescence – are dominant in the two countries. In view of this dominance, what can be learnt about the competition between different developmental models? What is left of the convergence implied by modernization? First, we can agree with El-Amine (2016) that the state is still the main unit of analysis for political theory, and therefore also the bearer or target of developmental models. And although the theories described here have normative implications, this essay has not addressed the normative superiority of one or other theory. But as the fragilities of democracies (Przeworski 2019) increasingly move into the foreground, it behooves us to consider how cohesion combined with pluralism can be strengthened by means of greater responsiveness of elites to people, and how this responsiveness is supported in different Indian and Chinese schools of social thought.

The most universalizing norms related to these social theories are individualism and pluralism, associated with the liberal strand of social thought. The notion of responsiveness to citizens also belongs to Confucian meritocratic thinking, and in India's majoritarian thought democratic responsiveness is currently mainly limited by religious exclusivism. Economic growth and consumer culture (though perhaps not materialism) are tacitly endorsed by all currents of social thought. Many of the benefits of statist developmentalism used to be aimed at agricultural development and we have seen that peasants guided Gandhi's and Mao's social thought. But Xi and Modi now mainly seek to lift the backward rural regions of China and India out of poverty, and their statist development focuses on high-tech and urban middle classes. Yet there remains in their thinking a distrust of Western economic elites since the economy should benefit the common national good, which chimes with

the thinking of some – for example Angela Merkel’s social market ideas – but by no means all Western political and economic leaders and intellectuals.

A counterargument to the arguments made here might be that the alternative developmental paths that have been sketched are not fully fledged social theories but rather alternative developmental paths based on bodies of thought that do not necessarily cohere. But this overlooks that social thought is grounded in socio-historical realities; in other words, that ideas about society may be aspirational or normative but they are also based on actual paths of societal development. No doubt there are affinities with currents in certain social scientific disciplines, but they also transcend academia and reach elites and publics in different ways. And while the different currents of social thought described here have different political and economic programs, one thing they have in common is some degree of cultural autochthony. The ability to pursue these alternative paths depends primarily on state capacity, which is weak in the Indian case though with some degree of democratic legitimation. It is stronger, though dependent on performance legitimacy (Zhao 2009), in China.

All social thinking is shaped by the relations between states and civil society or between elites and citizens. Intellectual elites can be part of ruling elites but they are also part of civil society. The battleground in which this shaping takes place also includes policymaking bodies, media, and academia. From a systems perspective it has been argued that globally, there is now a range between democracies and authoritarianisms (Stichweh and Ahlers 2021), with responsiveness of elites to citizens a key yardstick that applies to both. Thinkers from the global South combine thinkers from the West such as Marx and Lenin but also Fabians, for example, in the case of Nehru and Carl Schmitt among contemporary conservatives in China. They have also developed their own traditions of thought drawing on influential figures like Savarkar and Gandhi or Kan-Youwei and Mao. These Western and non-Western strands have become intertwined, but they now provide reservoirs of thought for guiding development in the two countries and around the world with “Indian” or “Chinese” characteristics.

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