

Thinking Modernity Historically: Is “Alternative Modernity” the Answer?*

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Abstract

This essay offers a historically based critique of the idea of “alternative modernities” that has acquired popularity in scholarly discussions over the last two decades. While significant in challenging Euro/American-centered conceptualizations of modernity, the idea of “alternative modernities” (or its twin, “multiple modernities”) is open to criticism in the sense in which it has acquired currency in academic and political circles. The historical experience of Asian societies suggests that the search for “alternatives” long has been a feature of responses to the challenges of Euromodernity. But whereas “alternative” was conceived earlier in systemic terms, in its most recent version since the 1980s cultural difference has become its most important marker. Adding the adjec-

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tive “alternative” to modernity has important counter-hegemonic cultural implications, calling for a new understanding of modernity. It also obscures in its fetishization of difference the entrapment of most of the “alternatives” claimed--products of the reconfigurations of global power--within the hegemonic spatial, temporal and developmentalist limits of the modernity they aspire to transcend. Culturally conceived notions of alternatives ignore the common structural context of a globalized capitalism which generates but also sets limits to difference. The seeming obsession with cultural difference, a defining feature of contemporary global modernity, distracts attention from urgent structural questions of social inequality and political injustice that have been globalized with the globalization of the regime of neoliberal capitalism. Interestingly, “the cultural turn” in the problematic of modernity since the 1980s has accompanied this turn in the global political economy during the same period. To be convincing in their claims to “alterity,” arguments for “alternative modernities” need to re-articulate issues of cultural difference to their structural context of global capitalism. The goal of the discussion is to work out the implications of these political issues for “revisioning” the history and historiography of modernity.

Keywords

Modernity, Alternative Modernity, Capitalism, Centrism, World History

The discussion below offers a historically based critique of the idea of “alternative modernities” with reference to Asian societies. While significant in challenging Euro/American-centered conceptualizations of modernity, I suggest, the idea of “alternative modernity” is open to criticism in the sense in which it has acquired currency in recent years in academic and political circles. I will spend the first part of the essay explaining why. I will then turn to a discussion of why the same circumstances that explain the popularity of this usage, and endow a long-standing idea with unprecedented attention, also have opened up significantly new questions on modernity and its histories.

I will argue from this perspective that “modernity” is quite sufficient to cover the newly apparent historical complexities, but what we have known as “modernity” needs to be re-envisioned be-

fore it can do so. Adding the adjective "alternative" to it has significant counter-hegemonic intentions. But it ignores that these new "alternatives," even though they are products of the reconfigurations of global power, remain entrapped within the hegemonic assumptions of an earlier modernity. For the same reason, historiographically, too, it weighs the scale toward historical research and interpretation around spaces that are the very political and conceptual products of modernity. Its historicization of modernity is accompanied more often than not by reification of the pasts that inform "alterity" in assertions of persistent cultural identity in those very spaces; namely nations, cultures and civilizations. Qualifying modern with an adjective distracts attention from fundamental questions of modern history. What is needed instead is confronting modernity as historical concept, not necessarily to abandon it, but to rethink it so as to accommodate our changing understanding of its present and its past.

The fundamental problem with the notion of "alternative modernities" is that it is not quite clear what "modernity" they are alternatives to, or as the author of a recent discussion puts it, "what is 'modernities' a plural of?"¹ In recent usage, the idea of "alternative modernities" appears more often than not in a cultural guise, and most prominently with reference to non-Western societies; in claims, namely, that the particular cultural legacies of these societies call for different trajectories of modernity than those of Europe and North America that in the past have provided the standards of modernity. This "cultural turn" in the understanding of modernity demands closer critical scrutiny than it is usually given either by its advocates, who partake of a tendency in contemporary culture to fetishize difference, or by its critics who simply dismiss it for its evacuation of modernity of any substantial content. Like the kindred term, "multiple modernities," "alternative modernities" as concept is symptomatic of another crisis in modernity, this time occasioned by its globalization. Whether these terms help account

¹ Ralph Weber, "What is 'Modernities' a Plural of? A Rhetorical Analysis of Some Recent Uses," in *Modernities: Sites, Concepts, and Temporalities in Asia and Europe*, ed. Sven Trakulhun and Ralph Weber (forthcoming SUNY Press).

for this crisis, or render it more elusive and obscure is an important question.

The stakes are not just abstractly intellectual, they are also deeply ideological and political. The search for an “alternative modernity” is of the utmost urgency. The fundamental question is whether this search responds to the demands of identity politics or problems thrown up by a global capitalism. Foremost among these problems are ecological destruction and the concentration of wealth in ever fewer hands across the globe. The one throws into doubt the future of humanity. The other creates inequalities of such magnitude that they make a mockery of the best promises of modernity for social justice and democracy. The significance of the quest for cultural identity is not to be dismissed out of hand. What requires closer attention is its relationship to these other problems of its context: whether the quest for cultural identity seeks also to resolve issues of social justice and democracy, or is made into an end in itself oblivious to those issues, in which case its claims to alterity are deeply compromised by its complicity in the existing system, substituting illusory promises of identity in return for compliance in social inequality and political injustice.

The idea of “alternative modernity” is anything but self-evident except in the trivial sense that modernization has not led to the cloning of societies after a “Western” model, which is itself an imaginary abstraction. On the other hand, claims to “alternative modernity” are highly problematic, if not vacuous, to the extent that they fail to address fundamental structural questions of modernity, and what alterity entails beyond the persistence of difference. The significance of claims to alternative modernity lies elsewhere: in the assertion of the right of different societies to define modernity. The Euro/American hubris that modernization must follow the course of Westernization has been questioned and challenged all along. The important question is why this question is expressed presently in culturally-inflected claims to “alternative modernities,” and why the claims have acquired such plausibility that they are now part of a global discourse, including the very societies that earlier claimed a monopoly on modernity. More than

the ambiguous evidence of cultural difference and what it might imply for the future of modernity, it is the empowerment of claims to alternatives that are in the process of transforming modernity and our understanding of its complexities. Whatever may be the shifting differences between societies, we need also to account for differences between the present and the past in our understanding of and attitudes toward the question of difference itself. That calls for consideration not only of cultural alignments but also transformations in the configuration of global power.

The transformation is as relevant to the past as it is to the present and future of modernity. We would be hard put to it to account for recent reformulations of the problematics of modernity in scholarly terms of accumulating evidence alone. I would suggest that it is the opposite: that transformations in our understanding of modernity also call for an appropriate past to account for them, which has led to the uncovering of new evidence, or the revalorization of what we have known all along. While this is to be welcomed for rescuing modernity from the hegemony of a Eurocentric historiography, it is not without pitfalls of its own. For all its counter-hegemonic implications, so long as it remains bound to modern categories of nations and civilizations, the idea of "alternative modernities" also opens the way to a historiographical parochialism, with hegemonic implications of its own in encouraging other centrisms. Attention to this predicament is a precondition of rewriting the past so as to avoid both earlier hegemonies and pressures to confinement in service of a global identity politics. This requires rethinking the past not just as a source of one or another form of modern political identity, but as a resource for addressing problems of a common human identity.

ALTERNATIVE MODERNITIES

The idea of "alternative modernities" has acquired popularity alongside the ascendancy of globalization as a paradigm in histori-

cal research and explanation. Its inspiration is clearly contemporary: the globalization of modernity which has empowered challenges to Eurocentric accounts of modernization. The more modernization has secured global acquiescence as an irresistible force that is universal in logic and desirability, it seems, the greater has become the resistance to its foundational historical assumption: that while modernity was a unique product of European history, once in place, it showed the way to the future of all societies without exception. “Alternative modernity” challenges this Euro/American centered teleology by claiming other possible trajectories of modernity. This “double consciousness” of modernity, to borrow W.E.B. Du Bois’ wonderfully dialectical term, is what may be described as a condition of global modernity; a new phase in the unfolding of modernity, characterized by the globalization of capitalist modernity, that simultaneously has invited fragmentation by claims to difference, especially cultural difference.

The conceptual premises of “alternative modernity” are relatively straightforward, at least on the surface. First is the acknowledgment of modernity as a global presence with universal claims, without which it would make little sense to speak of “alternatives.” In the words of the editor of a volume on the subject, “to think in terms of ‘alternative modernities’ is to admit that modernity is inescapable and to desist from speculations about the end of modernity....modernity is now everywhere.”² We may add that “everywhere” may also imply nowhere and, therefore, the end of modernity, but more on that below.

It does not follow from its ubiquitous status, secondly, that modernity means the same thing or displays identical features everywhere, which is where the “alternative” comes in. Modernity has assumed different form and content in different historical and cultural contexts, where it is assimilated or “translated” to the very conditions being transformed under its impact. It is also within the nature of modernity, with its commitment to constant change, to

² Dilip P. Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

ceaselessly generate new modernities out of the past, present and future. To use the terminology on cultural change offered by Raymond Williams, the dominance of modernity is made possible but also conditioned by an ongoing interplay of the residual and the emergent.³ The adjective "alternative" is employed in most usage with reference to originary Euro/American models, but it can easily refer also to other modernities, past and present. From this perspective, Euro/American models may cease to serve as the standard against which modernity is evaluated, and appear as mere "alternatives" themselves. This is what is implied by Dipesh Chakrabarty's often-cited phrase, "provincializing Europe."⁴

It follows, thirdly, that modernity is compatible with different cultural practices. This may suggest, as it frequently does, that modernity is "cultureless," and can be deployed in service of different cultural legacies. As Carl Pletsch argued three decades ago, this was the case with modernization discourse which perceived modernization as progress from tradition (culture) to a modernity ruled by technological rationality and, therefore, implicitly cultureless.⁵ It has been echoed in the Global South in the instrumentalization of modernity as "techniques," as with the persistent Chinese distinction, for example, between "substance"(*ti*) and "function"(*yong*) where the one referred to native values and the other to the practices of modernity.⁶ It also suggests, equally frequently, that while there is a culture of modernity, it is at all times part of a complex cultural environment. Rather than the culture of modernity driving

³ Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 203-5.

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁵ Carl Pletsch, "The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labor, Circa 1950-1975," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (October 1981): 565-90. For a discussion of the relative merits of what the author describes as "cultural" vs. "acultural" theories of modernity, see, Charles Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Gaonkar, 172-96.

⁶ Imperial Viceroy Zhang Zhidong's late 19th century formulation, "Zhongxue wei ti, Xixue wei yong" (Chinese Learning for the Substance, Western Learning for the function) seems never to have lost its appeal among Chinese thinkers despite the many changes during the past one-hundred years. For a discussion and a critique, see Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, vol. 1 of *The Problem of Intellectual Continuity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 59-78.

its competitors into oblivion, new cultural modernities are generated out of the interactions between different cultures. This has been the common theme in postcolonial criticism in the insistence on “hybridization” as cultural process, as well as in kindred notions of cultural translation or “translated cultures.”⁷ Hybridity, of course, has also inspired Bruno Latour to assert that “we have never been modern.”⁸

All this may seem obvious, as these three implications of the term are visible in everyday life in the commonalities as well as the differences between and within contemporary societies. These are the complications of modernity, as its forces have criss-crossed the globe, producing complex interactions in different social environments. In what sense, and for whom, are they alternatives? It is anything but obvious what “alternative modernities” might mean beyond a will to difference, what its spatial and temporal referents are, why the idea should have risen to the forefront of consciousness when it did, acquired a broad hearing that cuts across developmental divides, and taken a cultural turn. These questions are further complicated if we introduce an ethical dimension to the question of difference: are all differences desirable, and, in the absence of norms commonly shared as universal principles, who is to decide—a major predicament of our times, as is evident in the many squabbles both in societies at large and the highest levels of global politics?

From an analytical perspective, a fundamental question concerns the ambiguity in the spatial and temporal referents of “alternative modernity” that arises from its widely different deployments as a concept. These deployments range from concretely “culture-specific and site-based” readings of modernity to highly abstract equation of modernities with the spaces of nations and civiliza-

⁷ Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, tr. by Christopher L. Chiappati and Sylvia L. Lopez (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) and Wang Ning, *Translated Modernities: Literary and Cultural Perspectives on Globalization and China* (Ottawa: Legas, 2010).

⁸ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

tions.⁹ Viewed in tandem, these usages suggest that in terms of the spatialities of modernity, there are “alternatives” within “alternatives,” a suggestion that is also backed up by clashes that have marked the history of modernity. The relationships between the spaces of modernity—its social and cultural as well as political spaces—are moreover riddled with contradictions, apparent readily in the conflicts between local, national, civilizational and global claims to modernity, but also in conflicts between the social spaces represented by notions of class, gender, ethnicity, urban/rural divisions, and so on and so forth.

As it is with space, so is it with the temporalities of “alternative modernities.” Here, too, the arguments display a wide range in the reasons given for alterity—from the historical production of alterity in the encounters with modernity to assertions of seemingly eternal ontological differences between cultures that defy history. Impressionistically speaking, the historical argument would seem to be the most common: that alterity is the product of the processes of modernity in particular historical contexts. The argument is directed against the binary opposition between modernity and tradition in modernization discourse that conceived of modernity as a functionally integrated whole, and viewed the relationship between the two as a zero-sum relationship.¹⁰ At the extreme, this argument

⁹ For “site-based,” see Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities*, 15. See also the essays in this volume by Dipesh Chakrabarty, Tejaswini Niranjana and Michael Hanchard around issues of laborers, women and African diaspora respectively. The equation with nations and civilizations may be found in the essays included in the special issue of *Daedalus* journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, ed. S.N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (Winter 2000). These differences in the use of the concept are only partly due to differing disciplinary proclivities between scholars of cultural studies and the social sciences. The “classic” equation of “alternative” and civilization is Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” idea which, for all the criticisms to which it has been subjected, echoes the views of many in Asia from Turkey to the PRC.

¹⁰ Sudipta Kaviraj, “An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity,” *Archives of European Sociology* 46, no. 3 (2005): 497-526 and Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Chatterjee’s work draws on Kaviraj’s theoretical framework which I think is ill-served by his preference for a “sequential theory of development” over the historicity of modernity, as “sequence” suggests the possibility of specifying “constituents of modernity” that may be sufficient to its definition. It is not clear from the discussion why Kaviraj frames his argument in

captures modernity in a native space where modernity is comprehensible only in its service to tradition. In a book published in the 1990s, the present foreign minister of Turkey, a political scientist by training, argued for the necessity of an alternative modernity for Islamic societies on the grounds that their cultures were ontologically different from those of Euro/American societies. Racially inflected versions of this argument have been voiced by Chinese who seem to believe that Chineseness is a genetic endowment.¹¹ These differences, too, obviously make for different attitudes toward modernity, and different orientations to issues of universalism and particularism. They are at the source of much contemporary conflict over modernity; at its most obvious, between liberal or left multiculturalisms and “the clash of civilizations,” put on the cultural political agenda by Samuel Huntington, and widely shared by many around the globe. On the other hand, in the weight they give to cultural persistence (and in the extreme, culturalism) they are easily distinguishable from the politically and socially conceived search for alternative modernities that has suffered a major retreat since the 1980s, even though it by no means has disappeared from radical thinking. An example of the latter is the notion of “alter-modernity,” suggested by Hardt and Negri, that focuses on cultural renovation of human subjectivities in the course of popular global struggles against the anti-democratic politics of capitalism in all its local variations.¹²

There is another aspect to the question of temporality that is relevant to a critical evaluation of claims to “alternative modernity.” The discourse on “alternative modernities” has little to say on

turns of “symmetry/sequence” rather than the “structure/history” distinction with which he opens it.

¹¹ Ahmet Davutoglu, *Alternative Paradigms: The Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 195, where the author describes the “Islamic paradigm” as “absolutely alternative to the Western.” Lynn Pan in *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: A History of the Chinese Diaspora* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1994), 267, refers to Singaporean Chinese who seemed to believe in “some primordial core or unalterable essence of Chineseness which one has by virtue of one’s Chinese genes.” I have heard similar claims from young educated Chinese in the PRC.

¹² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 101-18.

the future that may lie in store for modernity, let alone for alternative modernities. Its suggestion of alternative futures against the teleology of modernization discourse is at odds with its simultaneous reaffirmation of globality. Its cultural and historical claims to the future suffer from the same uncertainties as modernity itself. Given the intensification of the mixing of peoples and cultures that characterizes the contemporary world, there is good reason to think that differences as understood in our day are likely to be re-configured, and give rise to new unities and divisions. Where then would spaces of "alternative modernity" be located, and what would be the nature of its alterity? We might also ask the question of the present and the past. Is it possible that those who presently claim "alternative modernities" are closer to those to whom they are alternatives than they are to their national or civilizational forebears with whom they assume a cultural identity? Surely, the "globalized" scholars of our times, though from different national and intellectual contexts, share a far more common cultural space than scholars did only a generation ago both in their scholarly concerns and their intellectual orientations towards ideas of history and modernity!

It seems to me that the idea suffers from the same transiency that is a defining feature of modernity to which it is parasitic. Alternative modernity is best grasped, therefore, as a product of modernity that itself is likely to generate still new modernities. Its alterity consists most importantly of perceived differences from an imagined model of Euro/American modernity that has been upheld in the past as a universal model of modernity; imagined because the model exists only as an ideological project. Euro/American modernities are historical as well, and do not provide a unitary model, especially when we look beyond formal institutions to everyday cultures. On the other hand, the discourse is also silent on the relationship of different "alternative modernities. How many "alternative modernities" could there be in a world conceived in those terms, and what would be the nature of *their* relationship? More often than not, the idea takes us back to existing configurations of global organization, especially the nation-state which is its

preferred unit of political and social organization, not to speak of the location of culture. If it successfully challenges a Eurocentric notion of modernity, it is less than helpful in the contours of the future it anticipates, and possible new hegemonies in waiting. Interestingly, all these alternatives share in common is the hegemonic modernity globalized by Euro/American societies. And they suggest little beyond that modernity's "normalization of the nation-state as the universal form of the political organization of humanity" which supposedly "contains within itself a mechanism for measuring cultural difference and for attributing moral significance to those differences."¹³ This is the case even when claims are made on behalf of civilizations which are inevitably mediated by national commitments and perspectives, as is revealed most eloquently in conflicts over nation vs. universal community in societies that claim Islamic heritage.

Differences among societies have been apparent all along, but have been attributed in the past to different levels of success in the struggle for modernity, and served as the standard for placing them on an evolutionary scale. The same may be said for strivings to discover alternative paths of modernity. The term may be of recent coinage, but the idea of local departures in modernity is as old as the history of modernity itself, though it usually has been dismissed or marginalized for its "conservatism" in an evolutionary Eurocentric historiography, liberal and Marxist, whether written by native or foreign scholars.¹⁴ As the Chinese example shows, most societies were initially attracted to the techniques of modernity to defend native values, an attitude that by no means has disappeared. As far as I am aware, modernization has been conceived in many cases not as Westernization but as "contemporanization," which also happens to be the basic meaning of the term "modern," derived from a Latin word signifying recent, new, and up-to-date, to

¹³ Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society*, 249.

¹⁴ See the essays collected in the special issue of the *Journal of Modern European History* 4, no. 2 (2006), "Beyond Hegemony: 'Europe' and the Politics of Non-Western Elites, 1900-1930," and Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

be distinguished from the ancient.¹⁵ The creation of a "new culture," contemporary but native, has been a pervasive concern of most societies from the beginnings of their encounters with modernity.

On the other hand, alternatives have not always been conceived of cultural terms, as is apparent most readily in the socialist and national liberation movements of the past century, but also in the aspiration of many oppositional movements, all of them devoted to the search for alternatives to capitalist modernity. In these earlier movements, the search for cultural identity appeared as part of a broader program of social and political transformation.¹⁶ It was beginning with the "cultural turn" of the 1980s that "alternatives" came to be conceived in cultural rather than systemic terms. There is no simple explanation for this turn. Cultural reassertion against Euro/American hegemony was one source. The appearance of new centers of global capitalism was another. But there was also a failure of nerve in the pursuit of alternatives to the rule of capital that accompanied the neoliberal turn in the global economy, further undercutting an earlier quest for autonomous development and social justice—what subsequently would be termed "globalization." What is most remarkable in hindsight is that the "cultural turn" came in the midst of a headlong flight globally from a century long search for distributive and political justice.¹⁷

The ceaseless production of alternatives is a defining characteristic of modernity. In Jack Goody's words, "modern, like con-

¹⁵ Luo Rongqu, ed., *Cong 'Xihua' dao xiandaihua* (From 'Westernization' to Modernization [Contemporization]) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1990) and Ziya Gokalp, *Türk'culugun Esaslari* (Principles of Turkism), ed. *Mehmet Kaplan* (Istanbul: Ministry of National Education, 1990). It is interesting that in contemporary Chinese depictions of the past, as in the new History exhibit at the Museum of National History, the post-Opium War period that earlier used to be "modern" (*jindai* and *xiandai*), or "semi-feudal semi-colonial," is now depicted as a "period of rejuvenation or renaissance" (*faxing*), with earlier history relegated to "ancient" (*gudai*).

¹⁶ Arif Dirlik, "Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice," in *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 23-51

¹⁷ For further discussion, see Arif Dirlik, *After the Revolution: Waking to Global Capitalism* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press/ University Press of New England, 1994) and Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1988* (London: Verso, 1999).

temporary, is a moving target, and cannot represent a periodization or a style, except in a fleeting and ambiguous sense.”¹⁸ Whether modernity is appropriate or desirable as a periodizing concept is a controversial idea to which I will return below. Suffice it to say here that “alternative modernity” is a very modern idea not just in its affirmation of modernity but in the aspiration to an alternative form of it. The cultures that “alternative modernities” draw upon as evidence of difference are themselves in many cases products of modernity; ancients reconceived in accordance with the demands of modernity, as are the political spaces that are the spaces of alterity. As Aihwa Ong has written, the alternative in “alternative modernity,”

...suggests the kinds of modernity that are (1) constituted by different *sets of relations* between the developmental and the postdevelopmental state, its population and global capital; and (2) constructed by political and social elites who appropriate “Western” knowledges and *represent* them as truth claims about their own countries.¹⁹

Support for these observations may be found in the foundation of claims to “alternative modernities” in the political economy of capitalism which, interestingly, is the absent center of most discussions, perhaps deliberately. If I may cite a lengthy passage from a recent work by Fredric Jameson,

How then can the ideologues of ‘modernity’ in its current sense manage to distinguish their product—the information revolution, and globalized, free-market economy—from the detestable older kind, without getting themselves involved in asking the kind of serious political and economic, systemic questions that the concept of a post-modernity makes unavoidable? The answer is simple: you talk about ‘alternate’ or ‘alternative’ modernities....this means that there can be a modernity for everybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model. Whatever you dislike about the latter, in-

¹⁸ Jack Goody, *Capitalism and Modernity: The Great Debate* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁹ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 35.

cluding the subaltern position it leaves you in, can be effaced by the reassuring and 'cultural' notion that you can fashion your own modernity differently....But this is to overlook the other foundational meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself....the only satisfactory semantic meaning of modernity lies in its association with capitalism.²⁰

In this sense, "alternative modernity" is similar to postcolonial criticism in general, with which it has more than a coincidental temporal kinship. Postcolonial criticism, in replacing earlier critiques based on notions of the neo-colonial, shifted the focus of criticism from capitalism to colonialism, and its subject from political economy to culture. The relationship between modernity and capitalism is more problematic than Jameson suggests as capitalism, too, is not free of cultural modulation. But it is still necessary to inquire whether it is possible to speak of modernity without reference to capitalism, or vice versa.²¹ The discourse on "alternative modernity" suffers from the lack of systematic analysis between the political economy of capitalism and the culture(s) of modernity; especially the rather interesting question that its emergence as a discourse that commands global attention has accompanied the globalization of capital. It is not that the discourse itself is novel. As I just noted, discourses on modernity outside Euro/America (and perhaps even within) all along have drawn a distinction between modernization and Westernization, drawn to modernization not to follow in the footsteps of "the West" but because of its promise to strengthen the material and ideological foundations of

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 12-13.

²¹ Even modernism, culturally much more restricted in scope than modernity as a concept or phenomenon, was intimately entangled in the political economy, social consequences (urbanization and the rise of a bourgeoisie), and cultural effects (especially anti-Christianity) of capitalism. "The seedbed of modernism," Gay writes, "was assembled from the widely distributed prosperity in industrializing and urbanizing states." Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy: From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 18. A classic account of the relationship between modernity, modernization and modernism is to be found in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982). An critical discussion is offered in Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution," *New Left Review* 144 (March/April 1984): 96-113.

claims to particularity. If the discourse has acquired a wider hearing in our day, it is because of a changed world situation. We may note that the discourse commands the greatest attention for those societies that have distinguished themselves by success in global capitalism.

The question of capitalism is important for reasons of economic and political power, which are not unrelated to the power of discourses. It is also important for a less readily evident reason: the relationship between capitalism and the culture of modernity. As capitalism has shaped modernity, it itself bears upon it the marks of its cultural environments. If capitalism, like modernity, assumes the characteristics of its cultural environment, as is often claimed these days, then capitalism in Europe was no different from elsewhere. The historical entanglement of capitalism and Euro/American modernities means that as those modernities have been shaped and propelled by capitalism, capitalism bears upon it the cultural legacies of the Euro/American societies that provided the context for its rise to global hegemony. Overlooking this connection between capitalism and Euro/American cultures is one fundamental reason for the fallacious reasoning, as with the contemporary Chinese leadership among others, that it is possible to participate in a global capitalist economy while keeping out so-called “Western” values—which all along has allied state projects of “alternative modernities” with the containment of cultural and political alternatives that claim autonomy from and against existing configurations of authority.²² Capitalism is not “culture-free.” It

²² “Alternative modernities” in Asia is a reincarnation if not a direct descendant of the discourse on “Asian values” that flourished in the late 1980s in criticisms of “Western”-style democracy, more often than not offering instead authoritarian political alternatives founded on kinship values. In a discussion of alternative views of “alternative modernities” in Turkey, two Turkish scholars write: “While all of them see globalization as an internal element of the changing nature of economic and cultural life in Turkey, act as strong supporters of Turkey’s integration in the EU as a full member, and stress the importance of production for the possibility of economic growth in Turkey, they differ in terms of their own discourse on democracy, pluralism and freedom. This difference manifests itself in the simultaneous promotion of both the universal language of civil rights and individuality, and a communitarian cultural/moral identity as a member of an organic unity. This means that free trade ideology as an expression of economic globalization ‘coexists’ with both liberalism and communitarianism in Turkish economic life.” E. Fuat Keyman and Berrin Koyuncu, “Globalization, alternative modernities

represents a culture of its own, which may be transferred from one to another social context, but it is also a vehicle for the transmission of cultural legacies of its social contexts.

The globalization of capital, in other words, also implies the globalization of the values of Euro/American societies that have shaped its development. Claims to "alternative modernities," unavoidably present contradictions with the cultural actualities of incorporation in global capitalism. They may even represent responses to problems thrown up by these contradictions; in particular the proliferation of values at play on the global scene with the polarization of capital around a multiplicity of centers in competition. The competition is serious enough. We need to note, however, that these competing values that draw upon different historical legacies and experiences to claim "alternative modernities" are themselves quite modern, as they now acquire their serviceability from goals that are often at odds with the social and political ideals that had informed them in their origins. An outstanding but by no means the only example is the marriage between Confucianism and capitalism with the development of capitalism in Eastern Asian societies. These societies are presently even more enthusiastic than many Euro/American societies about "development," an idea born in Euro/American modernity that they once opposed. As they have been carried around the world through the medium of capitalist development, Euro/ American values have become part of a global reservoir of values, even as they are challenged by the reflowering of native values under its fertilization.²³

The term "alternative modernities" is used most prominently with reference to nations and civilizations, with the implied suggestion of cultural homogeneity within their boundaries, which is at odds with simultaneous claims to the "cultural complexity" of

and the political economy of Turkey," *Review of International Political Economy* 12, no. 1 (February 2005): 105-28, 124. We may add that while it has its own cultural and even religious associations, communitarianism represents a political vision that is not restricted to any one culture.

²³ For a discussion of these issues, with reference to the People's Republic of China, see Arif Dirlik, *Culture and History in Post-Revolutionary China: The Perspective of Global Modernity* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2011).

the contexts of modernity. Assumptions of cultural homogeneity may be appealing to states, hegemonic groups in society, or to nationalists in general, themselves, ironically, the very products of the modernity they seek to harness. Such assumptions are contradicted by pervasive disagreements over modernity globally, including in the birth-place of the idea. If modernity is indeed “everywhere,” then conflicts over modernity are not restricted to conflicts between nations and civilizations, or reified notions of East and West, but are very much part of the constitution of societies globally. Focus on these political spatializations blurs deep disagreements within them over the prospects of modernity, which entail questions of ideological orientation and political power. “Alternative modernities” refer just as easily to different responses to modernity of different groups in society that do not share identical interests or cultural inclinations. Equally important, especially in our day, is the location of the precise boundaries of nations and civilizations as they are stretched, distorted and fragmented by motions of people, commodities and cultural practices.

Conflicts over modernity and the search for alternatives are integral to the history of modernity. What we may be witnessing presently is the universalization of the contradictions of modernity, a clash not of modernity and traditions but of “alternative modernities” vying for supremacy and hegemony. Claims to “alternative modernities” are indisputable if by that term we understand the historicity of modernity. They represent a further development of modernity as we have known it, with the incorporation of new social and cultural spaces, rather than a significant break with it. What we are witnessing, in other words, is competition between different modalities of capitalist modernity but all within its boundaries. Where this modernity will lead depends on the outcome of the competition, but it is not likely on the basis of contemporary evidence that it will be outside the boundaries of capital. Nevertheless, its new constituencies cast it in a new light by demands for the recognition of their presence, as much in the past as in the present, in a new configuration of power that justifies distinguishing it from its preceding phase.

MODERNITY AS HISTORY

This is the condition that I have described elsewhere as Global Modernity, to be distinguished from a previous phase, commonly identified with modernity as such, which now may be described more properly as Euromodernity, indicating the two-century global hegemony of Euro/American models.²⁴ Euromodernity is the guise in which societies around the world encountered modernity, in a form in which it was indistinguishable from Euro/American cultural and political practices; where there seemed to be little difference between the modern and the Western. It was not therefore immune to resistance that insisted on drawing a distinction between the two, modernization and Westernization, welcoming one, but resisting the other. The resistance was as much to the hegemony of the foreign that threatened to deprive the local of its identity as it was to the specific content of Euro/American culture. It took a variety of forms—from “conservative” efforts to rejuvenate traditions to the liberal search for autonomy in a new world of nations to socialist revolutions seeking to go beyond capitalism. But in the last instance, all these alternatives were convinced of the superiority of a “Western” modernity which demanded transformation of past legacies in order to move forward along the path to modernity.

How much this attitude has changed in popular consciousness, in the “West” or the Rest, may be questionable. But a brief

²⁴ Arif Dirlik, *Global Modernity: Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006). For a more elaborate discussion of the issues taken up below, see Arif Dirlik, “Revisioning Modernity: Modernity in Eurasian Perspectives,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12, no. 3 (June 2011): 284-305. My approach is illustrative of what has been described as “Asia as method,” going back to the 1940s, to an essay by the Japanese thinker Takeuchi Yoshimi, “Asia as Method,” that has been revived in recent discussions, most notably in Kuanhsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and Wang Hui, “The Politics of Imagining Asia: A Genealogical Analysis,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2007): 1-33. For Takeuchi’s influential discussions of modernity, see the collection of his essays in *What Is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*, ed. and trans. Richard F. Calichman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). For a critique of the uses of “Europe” and “Asia” in Wang Hui’s work, see Ralph Weber, “On Wang Hui’s Re-Imagination of Europe and Asia,” *Europa Regional* 17, no. 4 (2009): 221-7. I would rather replace “Asia” by “Eurasia,” which is not only more accurate historically but hopefully also avoids the substitution of one part of the land mass for another.

glance at discussions of modernity should suffice to indicate that the changes have been quite significant in global cultural politics, as is indicated readily by the idea of “alternative modernities.” Within nations, alternatives to Euromodernity earlier dismissed for their conservatism have moved to the forefront of national ideologies, including in Europe and North America, guaranteeing them a hearing even among those ambivalent about them—such as the Communist regime in the People’s Republic of China.²⁵ At the level of global politics, it is no longer possible to deny to these ideologies their contemporaneity, if only because of the diverse constituencies of discourse. The advanced/ backward distinction has receded before a recognition that all cultural legacies occupy the same temporality and spatiality, so that it has become increasingly difficult to formulate a standard of progress except at the levels of technology and economic development, which increasingly determine what it means to be modern as the common property of all societies. By nearly universal recognition, we all dwell in modernity, but experience it differently. The legacies of Euromodernity are everywhere to be seen. But so are assertions of autonomous modernities. In the case of newly emergent powers from the PRC to India to Turkey, there is a sense in claims to a variety of models or paradigms of development that the revival of native values promises the possibility of overcoming the problems of Euromodernity that would seem to be dragging the US and Europe into inevitable decline. On occasion it is difficult to overcome the impression that these claims find more enthusiastic advocates among Euro/American cheerleaders than among intellectuals of those societies with a keener appreciation of their contradictions.

The tensions created by efforts to reconcile the Euro/American origins of modernity with contemporary challenges to it are discernible in efforts to rescue modernity from Eurocentrism, including in claims to “alternative modernity,” as noted above in

²⁵ See, for example, the essays in the special issue of *China Perspectives* 2011, no. 1 (2011), “The National Learning Revival,” ed. Arif Dirlik.

the quotation from Dilip Gaonkar. To quote him further in the passage already cited,

Born in and out of the West some centuries ago under relatively specific sociohistorical conditions, modernity is now everywhere. It has arrived not suddenly but slowly, bit by bit, over the long duree—awakened by contact; transported through commerce; administered by empires, bearing colonial inscriptions; propelled by nationalism; and now increasingly steered by global media, migration, and capital. And it continues to “arrive and emerge,” as always in opportunistic fragments accompanied by utopic rhetorics, but no longer from the West alone, although the West remains the major clearinghouse of global modernity.²⁶

Similar sentiments are expressed by S.N. Eisenstadt in the influential volume he edited, entitled “multiple modernities,” when he writes that,

societies around the world have developed distinctly modern dynamics and modes of interpretation, for which the original Western project constituted the crucial (and usually ambivalent) reference point. Many of the movements that developed in non-Western societies articulated strong anti-Western or even anti-modern themes, yet all were distinctly modern.²⁷

If modernity's consequences are in question, so are its origins. The apparent proliferation of modernities, and challenges to Eurocentric accounts of modernity informed by Euromodernity, have thrown up questions on the formations of modernity the impact of which are clearly visible in an emergent revisionist historiography everywhere, that involves not only historians but cuts across disciplinary boundaries. World historiography certainly has benefited from this trend, while playing a pioneering role in demonstrating the significance of those questions. Beginning with renewed attention to the participation of others in the making of Euromodernity,

²⁶ Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities*, 1.

²⁷ S.N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” in “Multiple Modernities,” ed. Eisenstadt, *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 1-29, 2.

the inquiry has been extended to the equivalence of societies across the breadth of Afro-Eurasia if not beyond. This is apparent in studies of political economy that have revealed significant advances in these societies in the “early modern” period that made them equal if not superior to Europe until the turn of the nineteenth century; for which they have the support of Enlightenment thinkers in 18th century Europe who viewed societies such as the Ming and the early Qing in great esteem.²⁸ Similar conclusions have been reached in the study of these political systems.²⁹ Alongside all this, methodologically, there has been a shift from the study of individual societies to translocal processes—“global exchange relations” —or the “comparative method,” as Eisenstadt would have it (the two need to be distinguished). Western Europe and North America, earlier viewed as creators of modernity—and world history—appear in this new historiography as the products of world-historical processes emanating from a multiplicity of political and cultural spaces going back to the beginnings of time. In the words of a pioneering historian describing his most recent turn away from Euro-centered narratives of the world, “we dealt with it by distinguishing a plurality of webs, existing at different levels—in local village or hunting band, in individual cities embracing differentiated occupational subgroups, each with a variant web of its own; and thinner long-distance webs uniting clusters of cities into civilizations, and civilizations into a Eurasian and American cos-

²⁸ I am referring here to such works as Andre Gunder Frank, *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of the European Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). These works were published nearly simultaneously, and would quickly achieve seminal status in an intellectual environment anticipating their conclusions.

²⁹ See the essays in the special issue of *Daedalus* 127, no. 3 (Summer 1998), “Early Modernities,” “Introduction” by S.N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter. It is also revealing that this issue, published the same time as the works in the previous footnote, was festooned by the Chinese characters for *xiandai* (present, hence, modern) and *weilai* (the future) in addition to a scattering of “m’s.”

mopolis until they emerged into a single, and much tightened, worldwide cosmopolitan web after 1500."³⁰

There is nevertheless a persistence in all these questionings of the equation of modernity with Euromodernity. This is historically justifiable in terms of the location from which the idea emerged, but presents conceptual problems in light of the recognition that the making of Euromodernity involved the interweaving of many historical strands that reached across the spaces of Afro-Eurasia and beyond, and was not just the product of cultural legacies of ancient Greece and Rome, refracted through Christianity; the preferred choice of Eurocentrism. Should the broad global context within which modernity emerged in one corner of Afro-Eurasia be regarded as part of its prehistory or integrated into modernity itself as a formative constituent, even if the location of its emergence would leave a deep imprint on it institutionally and culturally?

The persistent equation of modernity with Euromodernity has favored the former solution, leading to a preference for the term "early modernity" for this formative period.³¹ The usage seeks to avoid the teleological sense of this term by detaching early modernity from its territorial associations, endowing it with a supra-territorial scope that encompasses a number of societies, from Japan at one end of Afro-Eurasia to the Ottoman Empire at the other end, which all experienced "early modernity" but of which only one would ultimately fulfill the criteria for the modern. This usage is open to criticism for its reinterpretation of early modernity as a re-statement in disguise of an earlier distinction between the traditional and the modern, albeit with considerably more dynamism recognized to traditions than had been allowed in an earlier modernization discourse even in its "modernity of tradition" version.

³⁰ William H. McNeill, "Leaving Western Civ Behind," *Liberal Education*, 97, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall 2011): 40-47, 47. The reference here is to Robert McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's Eye View of World History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

³¹ See the *Daedalus* volume, "Early Modernities," especially the essays by Eisenstadt and Schluchter and the discussion by Bjorn Wittrock. For a more convincing case of the use of "early modernity" for a Eurasian condition, see John F. Richards, "Early Modern India and World History," *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 197-209.

Similarly with the more economically inclined studies, whose arguments recall earlier Chinese Marxist discoveries of “the sprouts of capitalism” with their ingrained teleology never fulfilled. As a consequence, the discourse abbreviates Euro/American modernity by restricting it to the emergence of industrial society, on the one hand, nudging toward the sidelines the social and cultural particularities that produced out of transcontinental interactions a peculiarly European modernity founded upon colonialism, capitalism, the nation-state, and the privileging of scientific knowledge—all of which were preconditions of industrial modernity. On the other hand, in keeping with the teleological assumptions of earlier modernization discourse, bourgeois liberal or Marxist, the globalization of the scope of “early modernity” betrays no recognition that if other societies participating in the making of this early or proto-modernity apparently remained incarcerated within its boundaries, it was not necessarily because they failed to make the transition to modernity. Rather because by virtue of *their* political, social, and cultural constitutions, they were not headed along the same trajectory of capitalism as the European societies that were to produce Euromodernity (which by no means included all societies in the region, let alone that amorphous and misleading entity called the “West”).³² As is widely recognized in contemporary scholarship, the teleology is a product of Euromodernity which, having achieved global dominance and hegemony by the nineteenth century

³² See, for example, Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). Like other students of the history of capitalism such as Robert Brenner and the Marxist historians in China cited above, Kuran stresses the importance in the development of Northwestern European capitalism of social and political factors (corporations and the law) that were missing in the Ottoman Empire (and, we might add, elsewhere as in the Ming). The point is well taken. On the other hand, similarly to the Marxist historians in China, the author shares in a teleological tendency to view these “absences” as obstacles to development rather than as alternative historical trajectories. The latter view, a minority one, informed Joseph Levenson’s *European Expansion and the Counter-Example of Asia, 1300-1600* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), which documents the “alternatives” suggested in the title. For Brenner, see *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). Brenner’s immediate concern is with the English Revolution, but his study is important for showing the part organized merchants played in the development of capitalism which despite differences of emphasis he shares with other students of the history of capitalism such as Giovanni Arrighi, Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein.

through advances in scientific knowledge and technology, and the organizational innovations of capital and the nation-state, would by the force of arms render its history into the irresistible destiny of societies globally.

It seems to me that one way to address these conceptual problems (and to break decisively with earlier equations of modern and Euromodern) is simply to project the term modern to this period of "early modernity" in such a way as to underline the importance of the spatial in both the formations and unfolding of modernity. The centralized bureaucratic imperial systems that emerged in the aftermath of the Mongol conquests to replace earlier tributary states reconfigured Afro-Eurasian spaces, presenting a new topography to continental interactions, calling for new modes of internal and trans-local organization in the commercial interactions that all along had linked these societies along urban networks. As Eric Wolf wrote three decades ago,

Everywhere in this world of 1400, populations existed in interconnections. Groups that defined themselves as culturally distinct were linked by kinship or ceremonial allegiance; states expanded, incorporating other peoples into more encompassing political structures; elite groups succeeded one another, seizing control of agricultural populations and establishing new political and symbolic orders. Trade formed networks from East Asia to the Levant, across the Sahara, from East Africa to the Southeast Asian archipelago.³³

³³ Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 71. What part the Mongol revelation of Eurasia played in these developments remains problematic. Wolf observed similar trends in the Americas which obviously owed nothing to the Mongols. In his recent study of Central Asia, Beckwith rejects the view of the Mongol conquests as a "turning point," although he recognizes that "they succeeded in bringing much of Eurasia into one commercial zone that produced staggering amounts of wealth for those who participated in the commerce." Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 183. Central Asia was also the origin of the Ottoman, Mughal and Safavid Empires that by the early 16th century would create a "Eurasia without a center." For a study of these changes, focusing on the key port of Quanzhou (Marco Polo's Zaitun) in Southeastern China, see Wang Mingming, *Empire and Local Worlds: A Chinese Model of Long-term Historical Anthropology* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009), chap. 6. The consciousness of Eurasia persisted in Europe while it would gradually disappear in Eastern Asia with the disappearance of the Mongol Empire, as evidenced by the short-lived Zheng He expeditions of the early fifteenth century and the intriguing fate of so-called Korean map of the

I have described this period as one of “Afro-Eurasian modernities,” marked by transcontinental forces that would produce Euromodernity in the far West, but assumed different forms and trajectories in accordance with local political and social dispositions. There is some resonance between the present and this early phase of modernity, although the contexts are widely different in the intensity of commonalities—as well as the contradictions that would seem to be missing from the metaphor of “the web.” The world of Global Modernity is far more integrated than the world of “Afro-Eurasian Modernities,” but for the same reason offers fewer “alternatives” than were possible at the origins of modernity.

The contrast with “Euromodernity” should be sufficient, I hope, to indicate that the use of the term “modern” for this period is not intended to expand the temporal and spatial scope of Euro/American hegemony. If anything, it is to put these alternative possibilities on the agenda as we confront historical and conceptual issues of modernity from a contemporary perspective that demands non-hegemonic ways of thinking about it. Redistributing the spaces of modernity to rescue it from what Blaut described as “tunnel history” shifts attention from any particular substantive definition to the relationships out of which it was produced, re-

world. Similarly, the word “Asia,” introduced in the Ming in the early 16th century in Jesuit maps seems not to have made much of an impression until it was reintroduced in the 19th from European geographies. For the Korean world-map, probably of Arabian origin, circulating in during Choson Korea and Song-Ming China, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Volume 3: “Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth” (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 554-56, Gary Ledyard, “Cartography in Korea,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. II, Book 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 235-345 (fn. 31 for the Korean world map) and Liu Yingsheng and Yang Xiaochun, ed., “*Da Ming Hunyi tu*” yu “*Hunyi jiangli tu*” yanjiu: zhonggu shidai houqi dongyade huanyu tu yu shijie dili zhishi (Research on “Comprehensive Map of the Great Ming” and “Comprehensive Map of the Realm”: The Map of the World and Geographical Knowledge in East Asia in Late Medieval Antiquity) (Nanjing: Phoenix Publishers, 2010). It may be suggested that there were no trade and missionary (hence, educational) social constituencies in Eastern Asia, with an interest in expansion beyond immediate horizons, and the political clout those groups commanded in Europe, that might have found in the new conscious of Eurasian spaces anything other than passing or exotic interest. For a study of the relationship between politics, commerce and map-making, see Jerry Brotton, *Trading Territories: Mapping the Early Modern World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). For the ruler-centered response to “the globe” in Mughal-India, see, Sumathi Ramaswamy, “Conceit of the Globe in Mughal Visual Practice,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 4 (2007): 751-82.

turning it to its semantic origins as mere temporality.³⁴ The intention is not to deprive modernity of substance, but to underline the complexity and historicity of the substances it has accumulated as it has been invented and re-invented in the course of its unfolding..

There is also a predicament in a contrary sense that needs attention, and justifies the use of the term. It is arguable that the criticism of Eurocentrism, and the affirmation of local pasts, has encouraged slippage into alternative centrismes that find fertile grounds within a global cultural politics in which all pasts already have been nationalized and, as Partha Chatterjee has suggested in his study of nationalism, orientalized—an important reason for questioning kindred notions of “alternative modernity” as well.³⁵ Relocating these societies in a transcontinental space defined by cross-societal interactions is one more way of historicizing the past in order to counter the ahistorical historicism of national or civilizational teleologies. Euromodernity needs to be deconstructed without erasing the part it has played in shaping the globe over the last two centuries. The goal of understanding modernity historically is to deconstruct Euro/ American claims on the past in order to recognize the contributions of others to the making of modernity. But it is necessary also not to substitute new centrismes for old ones, and to de-center all such claims by demonstrating that they are all products of modernity. Only then we may be able to think beyond the confines of modernity.

WHAT TO DO WITH MODERNITY?

At issue in these historical reinterpretations—the historicization of modernity, in other words—is the concept of modernity itself. If

³⁴ J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 5.

³⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), chaps. 1-2. I prefer this first edition of this volume because of the question mark in the title which disappeared from subsequent editions.

modernity was the product of many forces extending in time and space, took different trajectories in different locations, was transformed at all times by resistance to its practices, and in the end has been overcome by the reassertion of national and civilizational historical trajectories, what was its significance as a globally transformative force? Perhaps more fundamentally, what are its defining features that would qualify it as a periodizing concept, or serve to distinguish certain spaces from others? Even more intractably, what meaning has it carried to different peoples? In its birthplace in Europe, the term modern simply meant “recent” in contrast to “ancient,” and had a long history predating its use with reference to a historical formation and its temporalities.³⁶ In non-European contexts with which I am familiar, the term also translates simply into “present-day” or “contemporary”—which is quite in keeping with the etymology of the term, its Euro/ American usage, and, most importantly, with ceaseless change as a distinguishing feature of modernity. What would these usages suggest? That whatever the substance of modernity, if indeed it has a distinctive substance, it has been given far more historical significance than it deserves? Conversely, it is just as easy to suggest that modernity as a process of change global in its effects produced a different substance in different places; hence it is impossible to define in terms of any particular substance (institutional or cultural).

Some scholars have indeed argued for the demotion of the concept as a historical category. Jerry Bentley has been critical of what he describes as “modernocentrism.”³⁷ It is quite plausible that

³⁶ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 13-14. The complex and contradictory history of “modernity” in “modern” Europe is discussed in a brief but illuminating essay by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “A History of the Concept ‘Modern’,” in *Making Sense in Life and Literature*, trans. Glen Burns (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 79-110. Especially important is Gumbrecht’s argument that “modernity” was inflected differently and acquired new dimensions as the concept moved around from one intellectual context (e.g., French) to another (e.g., German). These intellectual contexts are presently global in scope, producing all kinds of “alternatives” within an increasingly common discourse.

³⁷ Jerry H. Bentley, “Beyond Modernocentrism: Toward Fresh Visions of the Global Past,” in *Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World*, ed. Victor H. Mair (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 17-29. The avoidance of modernity as a break with the past is skillfully avoided in recent world histories such as Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World*

given the intimate association between Europe and modernity, a thoroughgoing anti-Eurocentrism also calls for the devaluation of modernity. The anthropologist Jack Goody may have gone farther than anyone I am aware of in debunking the claims to novelty of some of the most fundamental features associated with modernity, including individualism, democracy and capitalism.³⁸ The boundaries of modernity would no doubt look quite blurred and porous especially from an imagined long-term perspective, as suggested in a seminar on the subject by the distinguished historian of Mughal India, Prof. Harbans Mukhia, who wondered aloud what modernity might look like five-hundred years into the future. Mere strands in a "human web" stretching across time and space as far as "the bird" can see, to use Robert and William McNeill's metaphor? Or just one more period of rapid change in a succession of such changes, as it might appear from the broader ecological perspective offered by Dipesh Chakrabarty and the even bigger picture of Big History in the work of historians such as David Christian?³⁹

The specific may be contemporary, but consciousness of the problem is hardly novel. Hans Ulrich Gumprecht writes, with reference to Oswald Spengler a century ago,

The consciousness of being at...a decisive historical crossroads, together with his growing awareness of unsynchronized historical developments outside of "the small partial world" of Europe, led Spengler to repudiate the traditional segmentation of periods into antiquity, Middle Ages, and the modern as an unbelievably paltry and senseless schema. It was precisely "the transfer of the beginning of the modern from the crusades to the Renaissance and then to the beginning of the nineteenth century" made by his predecessors that had proved to

History: Power and the Politics of Difference (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010) and Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*.

³⁸ Jack Goody, *Renaissances: The One or the Many* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *The Theft of History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chaps. 7 and 9; and, *Capitalism and Modernity: The Great Debate* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004). I am grateful to Najaf Heider for reminding me that I should not ignore Goody's work.

³⁹ McNeill and McNeill, *The Human Web*; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 197-222; David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (2005; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

Spengler the fruitlessness of trying to articulate a historical development that in his opinion could only have been understood and represented as a whole from the very beginning.⁴⁰

It is quite possible to bypass modernity as a defining axis of world history. The idea has been problematic since its origins. There is no clear way to define its characteristics since a fundamental characteristic is the fetishization of change and the pursuit of novelty. It is at best the self-view that emerged in societies in Western Europe which in the seventeenth century began to think of themselves as an epochal improvement over their ancestors as well as other peoples, therefore claiming a break with the past and the Rest.⁴¹ The term has stamped on it the cultural characteristics of the locations that produced it, and the global hegemony it set under way. Its spatial boundaries are as problematic as its temporalities, cutting across and through societies. Besides, there are other ways to organize the past--through the lens of the individual and the family, localities--urban and rural--, states, regions and continents. They certainly yield different pasts, different worlds and different kinds of persistence and change than that claimed for modernity as a spatially and temporally totalizing idea: a break with the past, and the subjection of all temporality to historical time, along with the deployment of those claims to draw boundaries between societies that classified them into backward and pro-

⁴⁰ Gumprecht, "A History of the Concept 'Modern,'" 107. It is interesting that this awareness on the part of Spengler should have risen to the surface in the midst of a preoccupation with "the decline of the West," which also characterizes our present.

⁴¹ This is the view suggested by Fredric Jameson when he writes that "the trope of modernity" may be considered "as self-referential, if not performative, since its appearance signals the appearance of a new kind of figure, a decisive break with previous forms of figurality, and is to that extent a sign of its own existence, a signifier that indicates itself, and whose form is its very content. 'Modernity' then, as a trope, is itself a sign of modernity," *A Singular Modernity*, 34. He adds: "...the trope of 'modernity' is always in one way or another a rewriting, a powerful displacement of previous narrative paradigms. Indeed, when one comes to recent thought and writing, the affirmation of the 'modernity' of this or that generally involves a rewriting of the narratives of modernity itself which are already in place and have become conventional wisdom" (35-36). What Jameson says here could be said of as well of "alternative modernities" which are implicitly included in the statement. Hans Blumenberg wrote in a similar vein that, "*the modern age was the first and only age that understood itself as an epoch and, in so doing, simultaneously created the other epochs.*" Quoted in Trakulhun and Weber, *Modernities*, 1.

gressive, or traditional and modern, which were to become justifications for world conquest and colonization.⁴²

Modernity is under attack these days both in postcolonial societies and at its birth-place for having erased other people's subjectivities and cultural practices, as well as the creation of a secular world that denied the spiritual and the religious.⁴³ What remains of modernity if, in Partha Chatterjee's words, "by tracing the historical genealogy of Western political institutions we have established the sheer historical contingency of Western modernity, there can be no reason left to demand the symmetrical repetition of that configuration of institutions in other parts of the world."⁴⁴ The challenge goes even further to question the historical time that was the product of Euromodernity and reorganized the past in accordance with its prerogatives. History is subject presently to criticism from cultural perspectives that question the subordination of time to historical time, and instead point to culturally different ways of reckoning with the past that have not yet lost their currency, however marginalized they may be.⁴⁵ Depriving modernity of the historical consciousness that has been its ultimate foundation is in

⁴² This problem is discussed extensively in the essays collected in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: The Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985) and *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Samuel Presner and Others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). Koselleck writes: "...the historicizing of history and its progressive exposition were at first two sides of the same coin. History and progress shared a common factor in the experience of a genuinely historical temporality," *Futures Past*, 143.

⁴³ Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," for the question of religion in modernity, which the author has taken up at length in his works, most notably, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society*, 23.

⁴⁵ In his defense of alternative civilizational legacies, Ashis Nandy has been a foremost critic of History. See "History's Forgotten Doubles," *History and Theory* 34, no. 2 (1995): 44-60. Even more widespread is the criticism of History from indigenous perspectives. For a discussion, see Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), esp. chap. 1. Marshall Sahlins has been prominent in the advocacy of "culturalizing" history in tandem with historicizing culture. See *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004). Within Euromodernity, Gumprecht suggests, by the early twentieth century, "setting limits to the present as a period by determining its origin in the past seemed impossible from now on because of the accelerated sequence of historical changes and because of the recognition that there was a plurality of heterogeneous historical sequences." Gumprecht, "A History of the Concept 'Modern'," 101.

some ways to cast it adrift in a sea of temporalities, as one of many possible stories floating around randomly, as the fictional stories do in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

And yet the rush to modernity is a basic dynamic force of global capitalism. But modernity has come to be valued for precisely those reasons that account for its heartlessness and its inability to deliver sustainable truths: science and technology employed in the service of the political economy of capitalism. Spiritual comfort has to be sought elsewhere, in the turn to religion or to cultural legacies suppressed by modernity that provide identity in a world of consumption that threatens to erase it. But it is easy to overlook that those alternative sources of comfort have acquired new meanings in their new historical setting, including political and commercial commodification. We speak about the questions they raise in the language of the human and the social sciences; in other words, the language of modernity. Even the search for spiritual values has to be phrased in the language of science in order to be respectable. Historical time has become the temporality through which other temporalities are refracted; knowledge and recognition of alternative temporalities does not deter us from continuing to write in historical time. Our discourses are deeply embedded in awareness of a globalized world that has come to overshadow local worlds, with the intense consciousness of difference that has come with it. The values we take to be past values often are the values of modernity. With all the horrors it has produced, modernity has put on the global agenda values to which many aspire—sometimes despite deep opposition to modernity itself.

We must also consider what we stand to lose intellectually and politically if we abandon the idea of modernity. These generalizations are subject to exceptions, but I think their validity at a general level is backed by the evidence of our contemporary problems which, more than ever before, appear as global problems that are replicated across societies world-wide, suggesting the universalization of the contradictions of the political, cultural and economic practices of capitalist modernity across its many cultural avatars. Claims to difference notwithstanding, societies cross the globe look

to science and technology for the resolution of these contradictions. In other words, despite all the problems with it over the last three centuries, the assumptions of capitalist modernity—*Euromodernity*—have become integral to the consciousness not only of the Europeans who produced it but the world at large—as is suggested by the claims to alternatives. The self-representations of *Euromodernity* may be self-serving, ideological or illusory, but there is no denying either the profound changes the world has gone through over the past three centuries, or the transformations in self-consciousness that these changes have brought about. The horrors of colonialism, genocide and alienation need to be accounted for. But escaping into pasts beyond recovery is hardly the most desirable way to “overcoming modernity” even if it were possible to do so. *Euromodernity* also has opened up vistas of human possibilities that by now are a common legacy of peoples globally. Alternative modernities lost before its onslaught may be recuperated to enhance these possibilities, but only if they are able to overcome the nostalgia for parochial tribal identities in denial of a common humanity in search of global justice and democracy.

For all their instrumentalization in service to the *faux* universalism of imperial domination of variegated political colorings, these aspirations continue to serve as beacons of struggles worldwide against inequality, oppression, exploitation, racism, and ideological and cultural bigotry—no less in the places that gave them birth than in nativist revivals worldwide where claims to native cultural traditions of one kind or another, most prominently religion, have come to serve as disguises for class and gender oppression and the abuse of human rights in general. In a global modernity caught between the depredations of a globalized capitalism and oppressive nativisms, the need for universal visions of justice and democracy is more urgent than ever before. If the search for alternative modernities is to achieve anything other than parochial ethnic, national or civilizational interests, or serve as an ideological cover for social inequality and political injustice, it cannot dispense with universal visions of its own that address questions that of necessity are global in scope.

Historiographically, if modernity resists fixing in a definition or as a historical period, does it not nevertheless offer a narrative that makes some sense in both its successes and its failures of the world that has been in the making since the Mongol Empire produced a sense of Afro-Eurasia to complement earlier regional spaces across what we have come to know as Europe, Africa and Asia, which was subsequently globalized in the process of commercialization across Afro-Eurasian societies, to be extended across the oceans in the course of the development of capitalism in Europe—if at all times unevenly and in different measure. Subrahmanyam has suggested that we view modernity as “historically a global and *conjunctural* phenomenon”⁴⁶ (emphasis in the original).⁴⁷ Analysis along those lines calls attention to interactions at many levels, with their different temporalities, out of which modernity would be produced, and which have marked its historical unfolding. It is these interactions that defined the spaces of the globality that produced modernity, which called forth a new sense of time that accounted for the differences in these spaces.

This is the task undertaken by world history, itself a product of this sense of time. Is it surprising that a sense of a transcontinental world emerged first in the ecumenical Islamic world, under the direction of the Mongols who played a significant part in bringing together many worlds that had hitherto remained apart despite their ongoing contact for centuries? Rashid-al-Din Hamadani’s (1247-1318) encyclopedic *Compendium of Chronicles* is just that, a compendium. It kept apart the histories of the societies it brought together, and made no effort to produce out of them a transcontinental history as we understand it. It is important nevertheless that the comparative lay-out in their arrangement suggests a new attentiveness to their spatial relationships.⁴⁸ The interactions that ena-

⁴⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400-1750,” *Daedalus* 127, no.3 (Summer 1998): 75-104, 99-100.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the messiness in reconciling history and concept (or structure and periodization), see Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, chap. 10, “The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity.”

⁴⁸ For the Islamic Empire, see Michael Adas, ed., *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993). Goody has

bled this first compendium of Afro-Eurasian histories also produced (and continue to produce) the totality we call modernity, as well as the many differences it has contained and produced, but increasingly subject to the demands of the totality. As modernity produces alternatives, it also limits their scope within its horizons.

The "big-picture" perspectives presents a different set of ethical and historiographical questions. These questions may be particularly significant for breaking out of the bounds of modernity without denying its significance.⁴⁹ Its fundamental significance is ethical: to keep ourselves and our endeavors in a perspective that induces modesty, and helps overcome the hubris that nature is humanity's to conquer. It is difficult to say what the future will bring, but it does not look very good. Bringing nature in as a witness to modernity (as has been done recently in Bolivia) points to a new understanding modernity's problems, and the necessity of expanding our spatial perspective on it beyond the global that has been captured by capital. Cosmic time similarly places historical time in perspective, and points to the necessity of modifying our notions of change and development if we are to stretch out historical time beyond what seems to be an ever-shortening future. It suggests that the past is not *passé* because it is the past, and modernity's tools may not be sufficient to overcome the problems of modernity, for which the past may be as much a reservoir of knowledge as the use of imagination into the future. Indeed, the past isn't even past, judging by the worldwide cultural and political reversals of the last few decades.

But then, what is needed are not "alternative modernities" motivated by global cultural politics, but alternatives to the modernity global capitalism has created that re-imagine both the

argued for trans-Eurasian ferment during this period in *Renaissances: The One or the Many?* A study of the sections on China of the *Compendium* is available in *Bosi Lashete 'Shi ji-Zhongguo shi' yanjiu yu wenben fanyi* (A Study and Collated Translation of Rashid al-Din's *History of China in Jami' al-Tavarikh*) by Wang Yidan, (Beijing: Kunlun Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ It is interesting that what would be described as the modern period from the 15th century takes up half of the 300-odd pages in McNeills' *The Human Web*, which starts with the beginnings of humans, and nearly one-third of the 600 pp. of Christian's *Maps of Time* covering the 13 billion years of the cosmos!

global future and global pasts as resources not for parochial identities but in the cause of a humanity become self-conscious of itself despite all its differences.⁵⁰ This surely is also a product of modernity, and needs to be the point of departure in any serious effort to reach beyond a global modernity which is in the process of creating a world at odds with itself. A cosmic perspective—scientific or otherwise—is likely a precondition of overcoming the limitations of the world-views limited by the spatial and temporal dispositions of modernity, but only so long as it avoids telescoping human activity in a cosmic temporality that blurs the problems of living in historical times and spaces. Revisioning humanity in cosmic time still has to deal with historical time which, for all its limitations of vision, is the temporality in which identity is phrased and the world is perceived, in an obsession with progress and development, in which time is measured increasingly in terms of rates of consumption and displacement. Even if cosmic time reveals modernity to be an illusion, it is an illusion that continues to shape human consciousness and activity.

Overcoming this illusion is the fundamental task, I think, of rewriting the history of modernity. We dwell in modernity, our world is the world created by it and seen through its lens, our temporalities are determined by historical time. A cosmic perspective may reveal the transiency of our categories limited as they are in spatial and temporal scope. But its own plausibility rests on the perspective it contributes to the resolution of issues of modernity for which historical time is an indispensable point of departure: revealing the historicity of modernity, of the forces responsible for its creation, its many problems that are by now global in scope, and historically grounded paths to the resolution of all those problems. Modernity may be the source of our problems. It is also the point of departure for their solution. Recovery of lost identities in claims to “alternatives” is important to the extent that it helps us with

⁵⁰ For a discussion of an emergent concept (not just sentiment) of “humanity,” see Bruce Mazlish, *The Idea of Humanity in a Global Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

these broader questions—as resources for the solution of common problems.

AN INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSION

Following the logic of my discussion above, issues of modernity as concept or historical phenomenon do not lend themselves to any kind of conclusive judgment. I will, therefore, end by summarizing briefly what I have argued above and the premises that inform it:

1. Alternative modernity represents the latest gloss on an idea that has been controversial since its origins. This time around, it is occasioned by the arrival in modernity of societies outside of Europe and North America whose claims to difference are empowered by reconfiguration of political and economic relations globally. A basic problem is its avoidance of questions raised by these reconfigurations.
2. Reified notions of regional (most pervasively, clichés of east and west), civilizational or national cultures are products of modernity, and of little help in disentangling its cultural complexities. They also nourish a new parochialism. On the other hand, to the extent that they fail to address issues of their broader context, locally situated claims to alternatives represent strategies of survival or for elites ludic experiments with modernity that do not point to any serious alternatives outside or beyond a global modernity ruled by the political economy of capital.
3. The claims to difference that drive the search for alternatives have been most important for drawing attention to the historicity of modernity in its origins (if that is identifiable at all), unfolding, and consequences. Historicizing modernity is of the utmost significance in its comprehension both as concept and as historical phenomenon. A thoroughgoing historicism calls for the deconstruction not only of the hegemonic assumptions of Euromodernity but also new hegemonies that nourish off cultural reification. Difference is a quality not just of relations between nations, civilizations,

etc., but of social and biological relationships internal to them. Historicism thus understood is a democratizing method not only in countering the hegemonic suppressions of Euromodernity but also in rescuing from oblivion pasts erased by national or civilizational homogenization of diversity and historical experience.

4. Basic to my argument above is that critical understanding and deployment of modernity as concept calls for a recognition that it is ultimately a discourse of self-representations that also imply representations of Others—in the past or the present. Substantive definitions of modernity are at best of historical interest. Some distinguishing features of modernity are not modern at all. On the other hand, what constitutes modernity, or what may be allowed into its domain has changed over time, as is indicated by the radical transformations in its content over the last half century (including claims to alternative modernities). Economic and technological modernization is all that remains of anything like a common consensus over modernity (science itself having come under attack even in the birthplaces of Euromodernity). My argument above has been driven by the assumption of globality as a condition of modernity, and an insistence that spatial relationships between societies must be integral to any accounting of their temporalities.

5. Self-representations of modernity are typically phrased in the language of progress, and suppress what may seem regressive. Modernity is identified in most discourses as a realm of improved physical, political and cultural welfare for most of humanity. What these discourses ignore is “the dark side” of modernity that is responsible for historically unprecedented forces of alienation, deprivation, human insecurity, racist intolerance and mass slaughter. These, too, are integral to modernity globally. At the same time, it is important not to ignore in the criticism of Euromodernity the “darkness” that is equally the legacy of the many cultural traditions that are invoked in claims to “alter-nativity.”⁵¹ It is frequently for-

⁵¹ I owe the metaphor of “darkness” to Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options (Latin America Otherwise)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). For an impassioned critique of claims to alternatives in defense of Euromodern science and the Enlightenment legacy, see Meera Nanda, *Prophets Facing*

gotten in contemporary discourses that the point is not just to rescue the present from the legacies of colonial modernity but to struggle against injustice and oppression, whatever their origins. Products of Euromodernity such as science, democracy and human rights are crucial to such struggle. If difference is grasped in its contemporaneity—as a product of modernity—it makes little sense to invoke imagined pasts, which presently only serves to feed reactionary nostalgia and politics globally including in Europe and North America. The goal is rather to move past a globalized capitalist modernity marked by conflicting ethnocentrism toward the “transvaluation” of those values from the perspective of a human-centered consciousness that is global but also attentive to places and consciousness of everyday life.

6. Our choice of whether or not we retain modernity as a historical concept, or how we deal with its history needs to be pragmatic but not therefore arbitrary. Aside from their historiographical implications, our choices entail political consequences. My critique of the alternative modernities idea has been driven most importantly by a concern over its deployment in authoritarian traditionalisms that have enjoyed a resurgence with the decline of revolutionary visions of alternatives to capitalist modernity. Global modernity is driven increasingly by an alliance of capitalism, political authoritarianism, and a cultural traditionalism inflected by a culture of consumption. It seems to me that what is needed most at this present conjuncture, therefore, is a reconceptualization of modernity that opens up the universalist democratic promises of Euromodernity to recognition of values and practices in other histories in the construction of a new modernity; one that presupposes commonality in difference rather than an abstractly conceived universal identity, and places

Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997). As the title of the book suggests, Nanda is deeply concerned with the reactionary political and social consequences of cultural claims to alternatives. A similar point is made, albeit much more tamely, by an ardent defender of Confucianism in China. See Tu Wei-ming ed., *Confucian Ethics Today: The Singapore Challenge* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute, 1984), esp. 4-10, 27-29. See, also, Tu Wei-ming, *Ruxue disan shiqi fazhande qianjingwenti* (On the Question of the Prospect of Development of a Third Stage of Confucianism) (Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi, 1989), 6-16.

general human welfare over and above the well-being of capital or the fetishized promises of endless technological innovation. The search for a common future needs to start with the re-envisioning of fragmented pasts as a treasure-house of a common human legacy, whose subject is not national or civilizational in a narrow sense but broadly human—a Euromodern political fiction that is no less important for being fictional, and one that has much to recommend itself against competing ethnocentric fictions. It is also an idea that is by now a common heritage of peoples globally.