



Is Thinking with 'Modernity' Eurocentric?

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Abstract

In recent times it has been argued that thinking with the concept of 'modernity' entails, or at least makes one prey to, Eurocentrism. Those who are troubled by this have sought to rethink the concept such that one can 'think with' modernity, while avoiding, or even challenging, Eurocentrism. This article surveys some such attempts, before moving on to argue that the question of whether modernity is principally a European phenomenon or not cannot be adequately framed without considering the knowledge within which the question comes to be posed; for the knowledge through which we represent and understand modernity is itself, in its origins, European (and modern), and thus the relations between this knowledge and the 'real' that it purports to characterize, also need to be interrogated. Doing so, the article suggests, complicates the task of understanding modernity in non-Eurocentric terms, and leads to the recognition that the concept of modernity is not simply a means by which we describe, grasp or apprehend a phenomenon external to it, but that it is itself involved in the production of the modern. If this is so, we are (West and non-West) modern, though not in the way that we have hitherto presumed.

Keywords

modern, modernity, colonial, colonialism, postcolonial theory, Eurocentric, Eurocentrism, history, world history, global

Introduction

'Modernity' is one of the central categories of the social sciences, but in recent times it has been argued that thinking with the concept of 'modernity' entails, or at least makes one prey to, Eurocentrism. Those who are troubled by this have sought to develop intellectual strategies whereby this entailment can be avoided and have endeavoured to rethink the concept of modernity such that one can 'think with' modernity, while avoiding, or even challenging, Eurocentrism. In the first two parts of this article I briefly

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outline and discuss two such strategies: providing alternative historical accounts of modernity in which it does not appear as a purely European product, and pluralizing modernity, such that 'European' or Western modernity appears as only one form or variant of modernity.

The first two parts of this article thus offer a brief survey – albeit one that does not aspire to any comprehensiveness – of some of the current efforts to rethink modernity in non-Eurocentric terms. In the third part, the nature of the enquiry shifts: drawing upon my own work and that of others, I turn attention from considerations of what modernity is 'really' like – when and where it began, and whether it is singular or multiple – to considering the knowledge within which such questions are posed. For the attempts to develop non-Eurocentric understandings of modernity discussed in the first two parts of this article assume that the modern social sciences can, with appropriate adjustments and emendations, be used to produce a non-Eurocentric understanding of modernity. But the knowledge through which we represent and understand modernity is itself, in its origins, European (and modern), and the relations between this knowledge and the 'real' that it purports to characterize, also need to be interrogated. Doing so, I suggest, complicates the task of understanding modernity in non-Eurocentric terms. In the fourth and final part I suggest that the concept of modernity is not simply a means by which we describe, grasp or apprehend a phenomenon external to it, but that it is itself involved in the production of the modern. Recognizing this leads, I conclude, not to a better solution to the problem of how to think modernity in non-Eurocentric ways, but to a rethinking and reformulation of this problem.

Let it be clear at the outset that my concern is not with Eurocentrism *per se*, but rather with whether thinking with 'modernity' entails it. Eurocentrism need not, of course, only arise as a by-product of thinking with modernity – there are all manner of garden variety Eurocentrisms that derive from other sources, including a belief in European superiority, or an ignorance of any history other than that of Europe. When, for instance, Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote that 'the history of the world, for the last five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history' (1965: 11), the centrality he accorded Europe was not a consequence of thinking with the concept of modernity, but of adjudging European history to be more consequential than other histories. David Landes is ostensibly discussing the modern when he proclaims, 'the historical record shows, for the last two thousand years, Europe (the West) has been the prime mover of development and modernity...' (Landes, 1999: xxi), but in this case it is clearly not the concept of modernity that leads him into Eurocentrism, but rather the postulate of an innate European dynamism (stretching back two millennia) that leads him to conclude that Europe invented modernity.

The Eurocentrism this article is concerned with is not that born of a prior conviction of Europe's superiority; it is instead a consequence of an account which sees in the advent of 'modernity' a profound historical rupture; a rupture which first occurred in Europe and arose out of forces and processes internal to European societies, before being spread to other parts of the world. The knowledge through which we know of this rupture is itself a product of it, so that the categories through which we represent and characterize the emergence of 'newness' are themselves part of that newness. The consequence of this account is that Europe is accorded centrality; understanding the new requires that we

focus on how historical forces emerging in Europe transformed it, and then transformed, or are transforming, or have as yet failed to fully transform, the rest of the world.

It is true, as the above example of Landes, for one, shows, that this account is not always easy to distinguish from garden variety Eurocentrism. Nonetheless, the distinction is real, and can be summed up as follows: in the one case it is the presumed uniqueness of Europe that is seen as the reason why modernity (amidst other 'achievements') originated there; in the other case it is the rise of modernity in Europe that leads to the search for European distinctiveness.

The latter Eurocentrism, the one this article is concerned with, is the legacy of what is often termed 'classical social theory'. As is well known, Marx, Tönnies, Weber, Maine and many other influential thinkers felt that they were living in a society that was fundamentally different to all others that preceded it; a difference they usually sought to characterize in dyadic terms, through contrasts such as *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft*, feudalism/capitalism, status/contract, and the like. Since the societies that were seen to have undergone such transformative change were European ones, it followed that the search for the motor(s) driving these changes was also a search for that which made Europe different from all other parts of the world. Conversely – as with Weber's writings on non-Western traditions, or Marx's writings on India and his reference to an 'Asiatic mode of production' – the study of non-Western societies was usually a search for obstacles and lacks; for that which impeded and precluded them from an endogenous development towards the modern.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that declaring Europe to be the birthplace of the modern was less a 'finding' of classical social theory, the outcome of careful empirical enquiry, than a premise and point of departure for classical social theory. But that premise has informed most scholarship since, which, whether conducted in the West or the non-West, has ransacked the history of Europe for instances of dynamism and premonitions of the modernity to come, and the history of the non-West for instances of blockage and stasis. Modernization theory was only one of the more conspicuous, if unsophisticated, such legacies.

Alternative Histories

For those who are troubled by this Eurocentrism, an obvious solution is to sever the historical link between 'modernity' and 'Europe'; for if one can conceive of modernity as a phenomenon that is not uniquely and exclusively European in origin, then to think with modernity need not entail Eurocentrism. Thus some scholars have sought to offer accounts of the genesis of the modern that are global, or at least not solely European. Earlier such accounts included important works by Eric Williams (1944) and C.L.R. James (1963). In more recent times, the world systems analysis of Wallerstein, and the dependency theory associated with Andre Gunder Frank and others, have offered a systematic alternative account of the development of the modern (or of capitalism) in which it was not seen to be endogenously born in Europe and then transplanted elsewhere, but was instead seen as an effect of complex structures and processes that included Europe and other parts of the world from the very outset.

In the eyes of some this has still not sufficiently emancipated itself from Eurocentrism, for it still privileges Europe as the 'centre' of a world economy, albeit one which is now

seen to include non-Western hinterlands or peripheries. Andre Gunder Frank, criticizing his earlier work and that of Wallerstein, sees 'the limitation of this Wallersteinian/Frankian theory' as lying in the fact that while it recognized that there was a 'world-system', it still saw it 'as centred in Europe and expanding from there to incorporate more and more of the rest of the world in its own Europe-based "world" economy' (Frank, 1998: 30). In his later work Frank seeks to redress this shortcoming, now suggesting that a global economy was in fact an Asian invention, with Europe a minor player. The centrality Europe came to assume in this global economy was a late development, a usurpation of Asia's once central role that was not fully accomplished until the 19th century. As he colourfully sums up the historical account he offers, 'the West first bought itself a third-class seat on the Asian economic train, then leased a whole railway carriage, and only in the nineteenth century managed to displace Asians from the locomotive' (Frank, 1998: 37).

In accounts such as this it is usually additionally claimed that Europe's conquest and exploitation of the non-Western world was not merely the consequence of, but a central and constitutive element in, the emergence of global capitalism and the modern. Thus James Blaut seeks to show that the most economically dynamic parts of Asia, Africa and Europe were all on a par until the 16th century, and traces Europe's subsequent ascendance to the fillip given by the conquest of the New World, and by the colonial conquest and exploitation of Asia and Africa:

Both the quantitative significance ... of production and trade in colonial and semicolonial areas and the immense profitability of the enterprise, that is the rapid capital accumulation that it fostered ... add up to a significant vector force, easily able to change the process of economic transformation in Europe from sluggish evolution to rapid revolution. (Blaut, 1993: 193)

If such alternative historical accounts – there are many such,¹ and I have only briefly referred to two of the more polemical ones, where the differences and the stakes are particularly clearly spelled out – are thought to be persuasive, it might appear that thinking with modernity (or in this case, 'capitalism' or 'global capitalism') need not entail Eurocentrism. If modernity is not endogenously produced in Europe, any search for what makes Europe special or unique is presumably rendered otiose. Thus for Blaut, once it has been established that Europe did not 'take the lead' over Asia and Africa until after 1492, and that too 'because of the immense wealth obtained by Europeans in America and later in Asia and Africa', it follows that the economic dynamism of Europe was 'not because Europeans were brighter or bolder or better than non-Europeans, or more modern, more progressive, more rational' (Blaut, 1993: 206). Similarly Frank, having argued that Europe managed to 'muscle in' on the much more developed intra-Asian trade only because of its sudden access to American silver, concludes that 'Europeans had no exceptional, let alone superior, ethnic, rational, organizational, or spirit-of-capitalist advantages to offer, diffuse, or do anything else in Asia' (Frank, 1998: 283).

Arguments such as these provide an alternative historical account of modernity, one in which it is not immanent in Europe. If they are empirically plausible – something I do not attempt to judge, as my aim is rather to evaluate them as intellectual 'strategies' for

challenging Eurocentrism – they would seem to render redundant the question of Europe’s exceptionalism. Moreover, they carry an obvious political ‘charge’ – if the conquest of the New World, slavery, and more generally the colonization and exploitation of the non-Western world all went into the making of the modern, then not only was it not solely a European achievement, it no longer looks like much of an ‘achievement’ at all; the tone or valence with which we approach the emergence of the modern changes.

Judged by the criteria of challenging Eurocentrism, however, such a strategy is only partially successful. For bringing the non-West into the account of the emergence of modernity need not, in and of itself, undermine the Eurocentrism of the conventional account. This can be modified to acknowledge the ‘co-production’, as it were, of modernity, while continuing to assign a pivotal role to Europe. Indeed, this may be the new scholarly consensus: Chris Bayly, for instance, acknowledges that ‘to a significant extent ... it was change away from the apparent centers of the world economy, in the supposed African and Asian “peripheries”, which galvanized the metropolitan centers into action, modernization and conflict’ (Bayly, 2004: 472). However he still views north-western Europe as ‘more economically, intellectually and politically dynamic than the rest of the world at the end of the eighteenth century’, the manifestations of which included ‘an egotistical buoyancy of philosophy, invention, public debate, and, more dismally, efficiency in killing other human beings’ (Bayley, 2004: 469).

Furthermore, even if the non-West is made part of the story of modernity – for example, if the origins of modernity are seen to be deeply connected with colonial exploitation – this only pushes back, or reframes, the question of European exceptionalism: why was it Europe that exploited others, rather than vice versa? That is, even where the normative valence changes – where Europe’s ‘dynamism’ begins to look more like ‘rapacity’ – ‘what is it about Europe that made it unique?’ can still remain the question.² Indeed, this was precisely the form of the question for many anti-colonial nationalists and revolutionaries, who thought that there was some quality, not necessarily admirable, unique to Europe that produced the desire and the capacity for aggressive expansion and conquest. In short, a line of enquiry less inclined to approach the advent of modernity with admiration is still compatible with a Eurocentric account.

Finally and most important, because this intellectual strategy seeks to delink modernity from Europe on historico-empirical grounds, it is hostage to (empirical) fortune. What I mean by this can be illustrated if we ask the following blunt, even crude, question: if a knockdown empirical argument convincingly established that modernity is essentially a European phenomenon, would anti-Eurocentric scholarship put up its hands and concede defeat? This is of course an exceedingly unlikely hypothetical – this debate will remain inconclusive, for explanations of these sort include so many factors or variables that a great many (if not all) competing explanations are plausible – but it is in principle possible. And the answer is surely that anti-Eurocentric accounts would not cease, because it is not empirical findings that determine their conclusions, but rather the other way around. That is, in the welter of possible evidence, what is chosen and accorded explanatory significance is to some degree determined by the desire to challenge dominant explanations. I hasten to add that this is true of Eurocentric accounts as well – it is simply that these are longstanding, and the presumptions, passions and prejudices that went into their making have congealed, and are to that degree naturalized and thus

concealed. Indeed, precisely because of this, it is all the more important that alternative accounts be researched and published, so that scholars and students are made aware that this is a contested domain, and that underlying the empirical disagreements are political and ethical 'stakes'. But it also suggests that any intellectual strategy that seeks to delink modernity from Europe principally on historico-empirical grounds may be following a strategy not best suited to its aims.

Alternative Modernities

Another strategy for thinking modernity without Eurocentrism is to offer, not an alternative genealogy of the modern, but rather to pluralize these genealogies. According to this view, the classical social theorists were mistaken in assuming that the 'structural' or material features that ushered in and define modernity – including urbanization, a capitalist economy, the emergence of the nation-state as the chief form of polity – were *necessarily* accompanied by certain cultural features and modes of subjectivity. We need, in Dilip Gaonkar's words, 'to revise the distinction between societal modernization and cultural modernity' (2001: 1). Charles Taylor similarly makes a distinction between the economic and institutional processes that characterize the modern, and cultural ones, and argues that economic transformation can and does articulate with existing cultures, which leave a lasting imprint on the modernity in question:

Transitions to what we might recognize as modernity, taking place in different civilizations, will produce different results that reflect their divergent starting points ... new differences will emerge from the old. Thus, instead of speaking of modernity in the singular, we should better speak of 'alternative modernities'. (Taylor, 1999: 161)

The 'cultural' changes that historically accompanied the structural features of modernity in the West were not necessary and defining features of modernity, and have not been so in the non-West. In non-Western civilizations, capitalism has thrived, urbanization has proceeded apace, and the nation-state has replaced earlier forms of political organization, but without this always being accompanied by disenchantment and rationalization, by the disembedding of the individual from community, and by secularization. Indeed, social transformations have sometimes been accompanied by the opposite. It has been argued, for instance, that in parts of Africa modernity has seen a recrudescence of belief in witchcraft, rather a diminution of it (see, *inter alia*, Ashforth, 2005; Geschiere, 1997; Moore and Sanders, 2001).³ The conclusion to be drawn is not the one usually drawn, namely that such societies are pre-modern, non-modern, or are incomplete and deficient versions of modernity, but rather that they are variants of it; modernity comes in multiple forms. One of the important implications of thinking in terms of 'multiple' modernities, in other words, 'is that modernity and westernization are not [seen to be] identical. Western patterns of modernity are not the only authentic modernities' (Eisenstadt, 2002: 27; see also Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993).

As a strategy for thinking with modernity while avoiding Eurocentric entailments, this has many advantages. For if modernity comes in many shapes and sizes, and thus Europe is not the only or even the 'normal' form of modernity, then it is not the telos and

measure of all other societies. If Europe does not show others their future, and if non-Western societies are not to be viewed in terms of their distance from a norm, we can abandon the hunt for what they ‘lack’, and what the ‘obstacles and impediments’ to their development are. But a suspicion remains that this amounts to little more than an arbitrary broadening of definition, rather than a serious rethinking of what is meant by modernity; and that one consequence of the resulting conceptual imprecision is that what is now described as merely ‘Western’ modernity, rather than modernity as such, nonetheless continues to function as the secret referent or ur-form of modernity, ‘which others [are seen to] adapt, domesticate or tropicalize’ (Bhabra, 2007: 75).

This need not be so however, and is not so in the case of Taylor, for example, who does not merely provide a more capacious definition of modernity but addresses its implications, including the question of the knowledge through which we characterize modernity. Taylor argues that the conventional account of modernity, which sees it as European, does not recognize that the background assumptions and practices of the modern will be inflected by the traditions they encounter. It fails to see this not only because it fails to recognize that economic and institutional transformations do not necessarily entail cultural ones, but, more fundamentally, because it assumes that what Taylor calls the ‘culture of modernity’ is not on a par with other cultures, but is rather a culture where representations and cosmologies are finally replaced by true knowledge. ‘At the heart of this explanation’, writes Taylor, ‘is the view that modernity involves our “coming to see” certain kernel truths about the human condition’ (1999: 170). That is, the conventional account does not regard the core categories of modern knowledge as just one possible way of construing the world, but as the right way, finally uncovered. It assumes that pre-modern or ‘traditional’ cultures (including those of the West) had representations and enchantments and metaphysics and cosmologies, whereas we moderns have come to grasp (or been forced to see) the bedrock truths that underpinned these various constructions all along. Or as David Kolb puts it, explicating Weber, in this view,

Modernity is an explicit recognition of what the self and society have been all along. Modern identity is not just another in a sequence of historic constructions; it is the unveiling of what has been at the root of these constructions. (Kolb, 1986: 9–10)

If, then, our standard understanding rests upon the presumption that the culture of modernity becomes universalized because it ‘unveils’ the truth that has been there all along, the pluralization of modernities, if it is to be more than a mere redefinition (and one that continues to treat Europe as the most developed or ‘pure’ form of modernity), can only proceed by rejecting this idea. Taylor writes:

It is not that we [modern Westerners] sloughed off a whole lot of unjustified beliefs, leaving an implicit self-understanding that had always been there to operate at last untrammelled. Rather, one constellation of implicit understandings of our relation to God, the cosmos, other humans, and time was replaced by another in a multifaceted mutation. (Taylor, 1999: 171)⁴

This is a radical argument: both because it treats ‘modernity’ not as an external material fact (a reality) that exists independently of the knowledge by which we characterize it,⁵

and because it suggests that the knowledge by which we characterize it might itself be historically situated and limited, rather than one that transcends its historical and cultural circumstances. In the following section I pursue these intimations, shifting attention away from whether modernity is 'really' Eurocentric – which presumes that it is external to the categories through which it is represented – to the knowledge through which we pose such questions in the first place.

Knowledge of/and Modernity

The knowledge by which we know and represent modernity to ourselves is itself modern, and European. It began to emerge in the early modern period, challenging the pre-modern knowledge(s) of Europe, which, in Taylor's words, required 'understanding the world in categories of meaning, as existing to embody or express an order of Ideas or archetypes, as manifesting the rhythm of divine life, or the foundational acts of the gods, or the will of God', and 'seeing the world as a text, or the universe as a book' (Taylor, 1975: 5). By contrast, as modern knowledge emerged and came to be defined through a critique of scholastic, other medieval, and Renaissance knowledges, all of these were condemned for confusing humans with their world, for attributing to the world a meaning and purpose which in fact belongs to us, and which we have projected onto it. One of the defining features of modern knowledge, then, was that it presumed a sharp distinction between subject and object, knower and known. It further assumed that the world was divided between a disenchanted nature, which was to be understood in terms of laws and regularities, and a newly discovered object called society, which was a realm of meanings, purposes and ends. It also reversed the order between god(s) and men, presuming that gods were to be explained in terms of men, rather than men in terms of gods.

Modern knowledge, and the modernity it tells us we inhabit, emerged hand in hand. As the modern social sciences took their current shape in the 19th century, they appeared, in Peter Wagner's words, as 'a form of reflexive self-understanding appropriate for modernity' (2001: 1); as if the phenomena of modernity revealed or unveiled certain universal truths by 'generating' forms of thinking that corresponded to its structure. However, whereas the concept of modernity is a periodizing one, modern knowledge, while also thought to have been born in a particular time and place, is nonetheless thought to be applicable to the past and present and future, of both the West, where this knowledge first emerged, and also the non-West. Why should this be so? Why should a knowledge which we know has historically and culturally specific origins, nonetheless be considered to transcend those origins and achieve universality?

There is more than one reason of course, but the most important is a teleological understanding according to which modernity is the privileged historical site where something like Absolute Knowledge finally becomes possible. I am of course gesturing towards Hegel here, but his is not the only such account, even if it is possibly the most influential version of this account. When in the early 19th century Jacob Burckhardt wrote that the 'veil' which made man 'conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation' finally lifted in Renaissance Italy, enabling man to

recognize himself as a 'spiritual individual' (1960: 121), he was offering a version of this account. When early in the 20th century Weber wrote that disenchantment was what allowed men to recognize the melancholy fact that the world had never been imbued with purpose and with meaning, but that all meanings and purposes 'out there' were what we had 'put' there (1949), he too was making the point that it was only at a certain point in the history of humankind that certain truths could finally be discerned, truths which, however, had retrospective validity. Marx was making the same claim when he wrote,

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations ... Human anatomy thus contains the key to the anatomy of the ape. (Marx, 1973: 105)

This is the account of 'unveiling', an account in which the discovery of truth becomes possible because modernity finally provides the conditions for it. In this account modernity is privileged, and modern knowledge, the self-consciousness of modernity, is thereby also privileged. Here, the core presumptions of modern knowledge are not yet another set of parochial assumptions claiming universal validity, like a proselytizing religion, but rather are embedded in an account that purports to explain both why we humans were once bound to get things wrong, and how it became possible to get them right. This is what I have elsewhere characterized and criticized as the 'once was blind, but now can see' narrative (Seth, 2013).

This, I suggest, is more fundamental than the 'empirical' claim that the features that constitute modernity first arose in Europe; or rather, this is what underlies the 'empirical' claim, and what makes Eurocentrism so difficult wholly to escape. For if modernity is not a culture or a social imaginary like others, but rather what finally makes it possible to see what the world is really like, if it is not 'just another in a sequence of historic constructions' but rather 'the unveiling of what has been at the root of these constructions', then we cannot but privilege modernity. However much we may wish to be charitable in our understandings of others, and endeavour to recognize that each age has its own world view, 'our', modern, world view is privileged, for we, unlike others, are no longer in thrall to enchantments and cosmologies, lacking the clear-eyed recognition of what the world is really like. And we also privilege Europe, for the truths that modernity finally allows us to see (and for which modern knowledge is the medium) – that the world is disenchanted, that gods are to be explained in terms of men and not men by gods, and so on – were first unveiled in Europe.

Is there any way in which we can 'think' modernity without buying into this? In the next and concluding section I suggest that there is, but that it requires a fundamental rethinking of modernity, via a rethinking of the relation of modernity and the knowledge by which we know and describe it; one in which the knowledge through which we understand modernity is constitutive of that which it purportedly merely describes. This does not provide a better answer to the question with which we began – how to think with modernity without Eurocentrism. It does, however, recast that question in ways that are fruitful.

Making Modernity

According to Frederic Jameson, it is not the transformations which are said to characterize the modern that gave rise to the concept of modernity; the account in which the ‘realities’ of social transformation (rationalization, capitalism, individualism, etc.) come to be ‘grasped’ or represented in thought is mistaken. Indeed, ‘Modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category’ (Jameson, 2012: 40). It is a way of providing an account of rupture and change, whether that change is seen to begin with the Renaissance, the Reformation or the Enlightenment, and whether its defining characteristic and/or ‘motor’ is seen to be rationalization, or capitalism, or individualism, and so on. That so many different accounts abound (Jameson identifies at least 14 possibilities) is itself a sign that this is a story we tell ourselves, not an objective fact that then happens to be recognized and represented through the concept of ‘modernity’.⁶ The concept of ‘modernity’ is less a fact about the world – though the phenomena it points to (capitalism, rationalization and so on) may be real enough – than a fact about those who invented it and deploy it, and who in inventing and deploying it signal a sense of rupture and newness, by narrativizing a ‘now’ sharply different from ‘then’, and correlatively, a ‘we’ sharply different from a ‘them’. ‘Modernity’, concludes Jameson,

... as a trope is itself a sign of modernity as such. The very concept of modernity, then, is itself modern, and dramatizes its own claims. Or to put it the other way around, we may say that what passes for a theory of modernity ... is itself little more than the projection of its own rhetorical structure onto the themes and content in question: the theory of modernity is little more than a projection of the trope itself. (Jameson, 2012: 34)

The import of Jameson’s analysis is not to ‘deflate’ the pretensions of this narrative, but rather to indicate that the narrative of modernity has momentous consequences; the repeated telling of this story it is one of the ways in which we make ourselves modern, and others non-modern. This claim – that modernity is not a description of a ‘real’ external to it, but a factor in bringing that ‘real’ into being – is amplified by Bruno Latour, who similarly treats modernity not as a fact about the world that sociologists or economists or historians can establish (does it really exist, where and when did it begin, and so on), but as a form of self-description by which ‘we moderns’ distinguish ourselves from others. According to Latour, the modern/non-modern distinction is mapped onto the nature/culture distinction, for a sense of being ‘modern’ rested, above all, on the conviction that with modernity we ‘discovered’ or ‘unveiled’ a truth that had hitherto been obscured, and continues to be obscured for many peoples: namely, that humans and their society on the one hand, and nature on the other, are two ontologically distinct objects. Becoming modern

... consists in continually exiting from an obscure age that mingled the needs of society with scientific truth, in order to enter into a new age that will finally distinguish clearly what belongs to atemporal nature and what comes from humans, what depends on things and what belongs to signs. (Latour, 1993: 71)

This ‘Great Divide’ between humans and non-humans, between Nature and Culture, was the foundation of the other great divide, between us moderns and the pre-moderns: for we moderns congratulate ourselves for being

the only ones who differentiate absolutely between Nature and Culture, between Science and Society, whereas in our eyes all the others – whether they are Chinese or Amerindian, Azande or Barouya – cannot really separate what is knowledge from what is Society, what is sign from what is thing, what comes from Nature as it is from what their cultures require. (Latour, 1993: 99)

Latour argues that the distinction between nature and culture is not, however, a fact of the world that we moderns discovered, but a distinction that we have created and have ‘policed’. It has been a productive distinction, but its very productivity has resulted in the proliferation of hybrids of the natural and the social, to the point where the distinction becomes increasingly unsustainable. Modernity, in this account, is not a mere ‘illusion’, but nor is it a brute fact that is ‘grasped’ or ‘represented’ by the concept of modernity. Rather, the phenomena and the description of the phenomena are co-produced; and as the ‘great divide’ between the natural and the cultural begins to crumble, so too does the modern/non-modern distinction which rested upon it. With that, we belatedly realize that we have never been modern, at least not in the way that we thought we were.

Drawing upon Latour and Jameson and others (Asad, 2003; Chakrabarty, 2000; Mitchell, 1988, 2002; Seth, 2007, 2013), we could conclude as follows: modern knowledge is not just a way of grasping modernity in thought, or recognizing and registering the changes it brought about, but has been a force in bringing about the changes that it catalogues and characterizes. As the core presumptions of modern knowledge, including (to stick with the examples we have been using thus far) that gods and spirits are human creations, and that nature is disenchanted, come to inform institutions and practices and beliefs, modern knowledge serves to constitute, and not only to reflect, the modern. Because modern knowledge and what it labels modernity are co-constitutive, modern knowledge is most successful in performing its function of representing or understanding where it has helped shape that which it describes. That is why it is often found wanting when it is applied to the non-Western world, where it has not been at work for a number of centuries, remaking the institutions and practices it describes. Nonetheless, because the narrative of modernity circulates globally, we are now all modern.

If this is so, then our efforts to escape Eurocentrism take on a different cast. We are all, West and non-West, modern; but none are modern in the way that we have thought. We have all been reshaped, in different and unequal ways, by the historical forces that we gather under the concept of modernity. But modernity is not a ‘thing’ that exists outside of our categories; our categories are not the reflexive understanding that accompanies and is generated by it; and they do not give us privileged insight into all pasts and presents. Modernity is not an object that arose in some places and not in others, but a narrative and a disposition and, often, a desire: a way in which people have told stories about themselves and others, a way of being-in-the-world. It is, according to Talal Asad, a ‘project’, and as such, ‘Modernity is not primarily a matter of cognizing the real but of living-in-the-world ... what is distinctive about modernity *as a historical epoch* [is that it] includes modernity as a political-economic project’ (2003: 14, original emphasis).

Of course, it is true that the dominant understanding is still one in which the concept of modernity is seen to be a description or representation of something external to it, and that exists wholly independently of how it is represented. Inasmuch as that is so, it continues to be important to challenge Eurocentric understandings of modernity by developing alternative historical accounts, or by pluralizing our understanding of modernity. However,

we also need to provide competing accounts in which modernity and the knowledge that accompanies and constitutes it is not privileged, and is not seen as revealing underlying truths, but rather seen as one way of knowing and inhabiting the earth. Only then will our categories, explanations and imagination become as rich, capacious and diverse as the world(s) we actually inhabit.

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Notes

1. Conspicuously missing from this survey are the writings of the Latin American ‘decolonial’ school, including Dussel, Mignolo, Quijano and others. This omission is not because these writings are less important, but on the contrary because they are too complex and important to be briefly glossed. For a collection of some of these writings, see Morana, Dussel and Jáuregui (2008).
2. Scholars such as Frank and Blaut, precisely because they are polemically concerned with denying any ‘uniqueness’ to Europe, are aware of this pitfall. Frank seeks to address it by tentatively suggesting that Europe’s ascendancy can be explained by the fact that the access to New World silver coincided with a cyclical decline in Asian economies (Frank, 1998: 334), and Blaut suggests that geographical accident – Europe’s good fortune to be closer to the Americas – is what determined that Europe and not, say, south India became the site of capitalist transformation, bourgeois revolution and ‘ruler of the world’ (Blaut, 1993: 181). Even the conquest of America is not seen as evidence for European technological or military supremacy, for according to Blaut, ‘the Americas were not conquered: they were infected’ (1993: 186). What these otherwise rather unconvincing arguments do suggest is that contingency, sheer accident, should not be dismissed in any account of the ‘rise of Europe’. In a more convincing vein, contingency is accorded its explanatory place in Kenneth Pomeranz’s important *The Great Divergence* (2000), also not surveyed here; but for a brief discussion see Seth (2014).
3. Indeed, there is an important line of argument that suggests that we need to rethink the idea that even *Western* modernity was accompanied by rationalization, disenchantment and so on; that this might be more the mythology of modernity than the reality of it (see, inter alia, Bennett, 2001; Comaroff, 1994; Martin, 2011; Meyer and Pels, 2003; Owen, 2004; Treitel, 2004; Winter, 1998).
4. Taylor exempts the natural sciences from this, asserting that the revolution in the natural sciences from the 17th century *did* uncover universal truths. For a critical discussion see Seth (2007: 191–195).
5. To the objection that this is ‘idealist’, Taylor replies, rightly in my view, that ‘this kind of objection is based on a false dichotomy, that between ideas and material factors as rival causal agencies. In fact, what we see in human history is a range of human practices that are both at once’ (2004: 31).
6. That is why the question of which of these is the true and correct account of modernity, according to Jameson, is a misguided one. This will not be answered by evidence, for it is the narrative that ‘organizes all such material and evidence in the first place’; ‘what we have to do with here are narrative options and alternate storytelling abilities’ (Jameson, 2012: 23, 32).

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