On Alternative Modernities

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To think in terms of "alternative modernities" is to admit that modernity is inescapable and to desist from speculations about the end of modernity. Born in and 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 *longue durée*—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.

To think in terms of alternative modernities is to recognize the need to revise the distinction between societal modernization and cultural modernity. That distinction is implicated in the irresistible but somewhat misleading narrative about the two types of modernities, the good and the bad, a judgment that is reversible depending on one's stance and sensibility.

The Dilemmas of Western Modernity

For some, which would include contemporary neoconservatives like Daniel Bell, societal modernization which involves a set of cognitive and social transformations is both good and inevitable.[1] On this account, the cognitive transformations include or imply the growth of scientific consciousness, the development of a secular outlook, the doctrine of progress, the primacy of instrumental rationality, the fact-value split, individualistic understandings of the self, contractualist understandings of society, and so on; the social transformations refer to the emergence and institutionalization of market-driven industrial economies, bureaucratically administered states, modes of popular government, rule of law, mass-media, and increased mobility, literacy, and urbanization. These two sets of transformations are seen as constituting a relatively harmonious and healthy package. This is the idealized self-understanding of bourgeois modernity historically associated with the development of capitalism in the West that called into existence not only a distinctive mode of production but also a new type of subject —an agent who was set free from constraints imposed by tradition to pursue its own private ends and whose actions were at once motivated by acquisitiveness and regulated by "(this) worldly asceticism."

Against this bourgeois order and orderliness, the other modernity—the cultural modernity—rose in opposition. It first appeared in the aesthetic realm led by different, sometimes competing, groups of avant-garde writers and artists starting with the Romantics in the late eighteenth century and was gradually absorbed and carried forward (with its critical edge dulled) by the popular medias of news, entertainment, and commercial arts and advertising. Thus cultural modernity came to permeate everyday life. By and large, the proponents of cultural modernity were repelled by the middle-class ethos—by its stifling conformities and banalities; by its discounting of enthusiasm, imagination, and moral passion in favor of pragmatic calculation and the soulless pursuit of money; and, more than anything else, by its pretensions, complacencies, and hypocrisies as represented by the figure of the philistine.

1. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

By contrast, cultural modernity, especially its aesthetic wing in the middle of the nineteenth century, turned its attention to the cultivation and care of the self. Self-exploration and self-realization were its primary concern. In this quest for the self, a high premium was placed on spontaneous expression, authentic experience, and unfettered gratification of one's creative and carnal urges. Imagination was an ally, and reason was an obstacle. There were no aesthetic limits that could not be transgressed, no moral norms that could not be subverted. One must explore and experience anything—including the demonic, the artificial, and the fugitive—that would spur the imagination, quicken sensibilities, and deepen feelings. Only those who would thus venture, such being the heroism of modern life, could expect glimpses of beauty, premonitions of happiness, and a modicum of wisdom.

This aesthetics of the self did not emerge and flourish in a social vacuum. It came to pass ironically in a world created by the bourgeois, a world of incessant change and deadening routine. Every authoritative vision of modernity in the West—from Marx to Baudelaire, from Nietzsche to Weber, from Simmel to Musil to Benjamin—is obliged to dwell and grapple with that twin matrix of change and routine in which the modern self is made and unmade. Those unforgettable figures of modernity—Marx's "revolutionary," Baudelaire's "dandy," Nietzsche's "superman," Weber's "social scientist," Simmel's "stranger," Musil's "man without qualities," and Benjamin's "flaneur"—each is caught and carried in the intoxicating rush of an epochal change and yet finds himself fixed and formulated by a disciplinary system of social roles and functions. The accumulated tension and pathos of that condition so alluringly drawn in the psychological profile of those canonical "literary" figures—who are at once disengaged and embroiled, reflexive and blind, spectators and participants in every scene of life—finds its contemporary articulation, no longer confined to the West (nor confined to literature), in the idea/experience of "double consciousness," the poisoned gift (of modernity) for all who would be modern.

Marx unambiguously names the bourgeois as the authors of those revolutionary changes that ushered in the modern age. "The bourgeois," writes Marx, "during the rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together." What intrigues Marx is not so much technological and industrial achievement but the manner in which the bourgeois has harnessed the productive powers that lay hitherto dormant in "the lap of social labor." They have instituted a mode of production that feeds on an unending cycle of competition, innovation, and destructive/creative change. There is no stability; "innovative self-destruction" is the order

of the day.[2] For Marx, what distinguishes the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times is that "constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation" which sweeps away "all fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions."[3]

What endures is the vortex of everyday life. With received traditions of religion, philosophy, myth, and art in disarray, the "life-world" emerges from the shadow of those symbolic structures and begins to command attention as an autonomous domain of cultural practice. Charles Baudelaire, more than anyone else in the middle of the nineteenth century, self-consciously sought to make the character and contents of everyday life the privileged object of aesthetic contemplation and cultural critique. But everyday life, as Baudelaire recognized, is an elusive object: It is concrete, but fragmentary; it is immediately present, but in flux. That recognition led him to search for modernity at the crossing where the fugitive materiality of the life-world impinges on a sharpened consciousness of the present. Nowhere is that crossing more vivid and dramatic than in the life and work of a modern city, such as Baudelaire's Paris. Here, in scenes of both "high" and "low" life, he finds the heroism of modern life and thus puts an end to what had by then become a tiresome *querelle des anciens et des modernes*:

> Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent, it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable. . . . You have no right to despise this transitory fleeting element, the metaphorphoses of which are so frequent, nor to dispense with it. If you do, you inevitably fall into the emptiness of an abstract and undefinable beauty. . . . Woe betide the man who goes to antiquity for the study of anything other than ideal art, logic, and general method! By immersing himself too deeply in it, he will no longer have the present in his mind's eye; he throws away the value and privileges afforded by circumstance; for nearly all our originality comes from the stamp that *time* impresses upon our sensibility.[4]

Baudelaire is not content to treat modernity as a mere descriptive (and periodizing) term. Before specifying "the epic quality of modern life" and showing how "our age is no less rich than ancient times in sublime themes," which he does eloquently in his haunting sketches of Parisian life, Baudelaire insists in a distinctly

2. For an insightful reading of Marx and modernity, see Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 87–130.

3. All the quotes from Marx and Engels in this paragraph are from *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 338–39.

4. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 403–5.

historicist manner that "since every age and every people have had their own form of beauty, we inevitably have ours." That historicist dictum sets the stage for what Baudelaire considers "the main and essential question, which is to examine whether we have a specific kind of beauty, inherent in new forms of passion."

In exploring those "new forms of passion," Baudelaire calls into question the continuing relevance of yet another venerable opposition between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. Neither pole of the opposition, from Aristotle to Renaissance Humanism, had paid much attention to the struggles and pleasures of everyday life, which were relegated to the interiors of the household. Living in the midst of "everlasting uncertainty and agitation," Baudelaire does not anticipate "new forms of passion" to flow out of a pursuit of contemplative life. As for the French Republican ideal of active civic life, Baudelaire admits mockingly that we do have "our victories and our political heroism," but the artists who dwell on those "public and official subjects" do so reluctantly "with an ill grace because they are at the beck and call of the government that pays them." The heroism and beauty of modern life resides elsewhere—in private subjects or, more precisely, in civil society. New forms of passion are adrift here; they are not to be found around state-sponsored memories and monuments. Baudelaire was the first to offer a poetics of civil society: "Scenes of high life and of the thousands of uprooted lives that haunt the underworld of a great city, criminals and prostitutes, the *Gazette des Tribunaux* and the *Moniteur* are there to show us that we have only to open our eyes to see and know the heroism of our day. . . . The marvelous envelops and saturates us like the atmosphere; but we fail to see it."[5]

Baudelaire's summons to "open our eyes" entails more than learning to read and appreciate the scattered fragments of beauty and heroism amidst the barrage of ideas and images, moods and experiences, desires and fantasies routinely conjured up by the metropolitan culture for its inhabitants. Baudelaire also wants us to awaken to the intimations of "the eternal and the immovable" in the new and as yet unnamed, ill-understood passions that begot those fragments, and to grasp therein that (form?) which confers the status of the "classic" on what is temporally bound. Here modernity becomes normative. Prior to Baudelaire, and despite contextual variations, the term *modern* generally designates the consciousness of

5. All the quotes by Baudelaire in this paragraph are from "Of the Heroism of Modern Life," in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 104–7.

an age that imagines itself as having made the transition from the old to the new. This consciousness takes two different forms. In one version, the old representing venerable antiquity haunts and instructs the new. The old, as the custodian of the classical, sets the measures and models of human excellence that each new age must seek to emulate under altered conditions without ever hoping to surpass it. In the other version, which came into prominence with the Enlightenment, the modern is associated with the scientific superiority of the present over antiquity. With visions of the infinite progress of knowledge and continuous improvement in moral and material life, the "modern" at last frees itself from the spell of antiquity.

Against these two historically specific versions of modernity, Baudelaire, drawing on the Romantic theories of temporality, posits an abstract opposition between tradition and the present. By equating modernity with the present, Baudelaire opens "the paradoxical possibility of going beyond the flow of history through the consciousness of historicity in its most concrete immediacy, in its presentness."[6] "Presentness," in turn, is defined and marked by "the new," which is always in a state of disappearance, destined to be overcome and made obsolete through the novelty of the next fashion. One might interrupt the dialectic of novelty and disappearance by separating the "modern" from the fashionable: While the former endures the ravages of time, the latter erodes. Ironically, here one reverts to the notion of the classical—that is, that which endures in time—to recuperate the modern. But there is a crucial difference, as Jürgen Habermas notes: "The emphatically modern document no longer borrows this power of being a classic from the authority of a past epoch; instead, a modern work becomes a classic because it has once been authentically modern."[7] This is a double-edged gesture: Having deprived the tradition of its mediating function, the modern renounces its claim to instruct the future. Everything turns to the present, and that present, having broken out of the continuum of history, is caught in an unceasing process of internal ruptures and fragmentation. The modernist present, so conceived, is either ripe with danger and revelation, as with Walter Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit*, or devoid of hope and redemption, as with T. S. Eliot: "If all time is eternally present, All Time is unredeemable."[8]

What is "authentically" modern? Could the idea (or is it the rhetoric) of the

6. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), 50.
7. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," trans. Seyla Benhabib in *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), 4.
8. T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1971), 117.

authentic rescue and secure the modern from a situation so poignant and divided? Clearly, one cannot find the modern by stepping outside the stream of the stylish and the fashionable. It is not an atemporal transcendental entity. To find "the eternal and the immutable" half of the modern, one must go by way of "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent"; to find the modern, one must go by the way of the fashionable. But fashion is not innocent of history; it continually scavenges the past for props, masks, and costumes. Perhaps one could make history lurk back through fashion, as Benjamin suggests that the (Robbespierre-imagined) French Revolutionaries sought to do: "The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past. This jump, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution."[9] Perhaps that is how we should understand modernity: a leap in the open air of the present as . . . history.

For those who would leap in the open air of the present, there is the sobering prospect of having to land in a Weberian "iron cage," a disenchanted world of shrinking freedom bereft of meaning.[10] The other side of flux and novelty is the routinization and standardization of vast sectors of people's lives, which follow societal modernization and which give rise to a pervasive sense of alienation and despair. Max Weber's dark vision of societal modernity, which undercuts the Enlightenment project from within, is as compelling and influential as Baudelaire's vision of aesthetic modernity.

The eighteenth-century philosophers of the Enlightenment had limitless faith in the emancipatory potential of human reason. They believed that when reason is properly deployed, as exemplified in scientific inquiry, it will lead to steady progress in both the material and the moral condition of mankind. The former will be enriched through an explosive increase in productive powers that will accrue with the technological mastery of nature and with an efficient and planned administration of collective existence. As for the latter, the Enlightenment philosophers believed that the rationalization of cultural and social life resulting from the spread of scientific knowledge and attitude would lead, among other things, to the progressive eradication of traditional superstitions, prejudices, and

9. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 261.

10. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner's, 1958).

errors and to the gradual establishment of a republican form of government. This government would guarantee civil rights and promote political will formation through open and free debate, while a free and equitable economy ensured general prosperity and growth by allowing individuals to energetically pursue their own interests as long as they do not impede the like pursuit of others.

Those anticipations and projections have been partially fulfilled, albeit in an uneven and distorted manner. But, more critically, the long march of reason has disclosed its essential character and its inherent limitations. According to Weber, the rationality that sustains and defines modernity is a purposive or means/ends rationality. Being value-neutral, purposive rationality is incapable of conferring meaning on the world it ushers into existence. At the same time, it works steadily to discredit and dissolve the traditional religious worldviews that, despite their errancy, give meaning and unity to life. As Habermas notes: "With cultural rationalization of this sort, the threat increases that the life-world, whose traditional substance has been already devalued, will become more and more impoverished."[11] Thus, in Weber's account, the triumph of reason culminates not in the establishment of a rational utopia imagined by the Enlightenment philosophers but in the forging of an "iron cage" of economic compulsion and bureaucratic control.

Such, briefly, is the tale of two intersecting visions of modernity in the West: the Weberian societal/cultural modernity and the Baudelairian cultural/aesthetic modernity. Culture is the capacious and contested middle term. In the Weberian vision, societal modernization fragments cultural meaning and unity. The Baudelairian vision, which is equally alert to the effects of modernization, seeks to redeem modern culture by aestheticizing it. Each has a bright side and a dark side. The bright side of societal modernization anticipated by Enlightenment philosophers and analyzed by Weber refers to the palpable improvement in the material conditions of life as evident in economic prosperity, political emancipation, technological mastery, and the general growth of specialist knowledge. The dark side refers to the existential experience of alienation and despair associated with living in a disenchanted world of deadening and meaningless routine. This is the Sisyphean world of repetition devoid of a subjectively meaningful telos. The bright side of the Baudelairian vision draws on a different aspect of the experience of modernity. It focuses affectively on the cultural patina of modernity as a spectacle of speed, novelty, and effervescence. It finds aesthetic pleasure and creative excitement in treading the surface and is unencumbered by the hermeneutic

11. Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," 9.

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temptation of having to find meaning and unity hidden beneath surface experiences. The dark side suggests the absence of moral constraints in a world of appearances where the aesthetic pursuit can deteriorate from a disciplined Nietzschean self-assertion against a seemingly meaningless and absurd world into narcissistic self-absorption and hedonism.

Two Responses to the Dilemmas of Modernity

My account of the divided, Janus-like character of both visions of modernity is only one among many narratives about its career in the West. However, despite the variations in the choice of key figures, seminal texts, and defining themes and concepts, virtually every scholar on modernity and its future feels compelled to address the dilemmas posed by its dual character. They also share an urge to imagine and propose a scenario that would attenuate and control the dark side while sustaining and enhancing the bright side. But that obvious goal requires one to specify how the two sides are conceived and connected, which, in turn, leads one into making rather murky distinctions between what is necessary/unavoidable and what is optional/avoidable within the project of modernity. Here the responses to the dilemmas of modernity vary greatly. Consider, for instance, the strikingly different positions taken by two major thinkers on modernity: Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault.

For Habermas, modernity is an "incomplete" but redeemable project. In his numerous writings on the subject, Habermas pays particular attention to the Weberian argument about the disillusionment with the Enlightenment project of modernity and the resultant loss of faith in reason to direct our lives.[12] He does not question Weber's claim that modern society has witnessed a progressive erosion of meaning and freedom, and he concedes that some of this is the result of sociocultural rationalization. But Habermas firmly rejects the Weberian equation of reason with *Zweckrationalität* (purposive, instrumental rationality), along with the deeply pessimistic vein in which that equation is interpreted and elaborated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[13] For Habermas, to construe sociocultural rationalization primarily in terms of reifica-

12. See Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987); *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

13. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).

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tion (as in Georg Lukács) and techniques of administrative power and control (as in Foucault) is mistaken because it confuses the selective deployment of reason under capitalist modernization with the nature and telos of reason itself. Moreover, Habermas argues that reason is reduced to an instrumental mode only within the confines of subject-centered reason associated with the philosophy of consciousness. He believes that an alternative paradigm of reason such as the one enunciated in his *Theory of Communicative Action* would facilitate a balanced development of different dimensions of rationality necessary for understanding and living in a modern world.[14] While the details of Habermas's theory of communicative action are not germane here, it should be noted that he is committed to rehabilitating the project of modernity by revivifying reason as an agency with many forms and voices.

In contrast, Foucault's riveting accounts of how disciplinary society emerged from within the folds of the Enlightenment project of modernity holds out little hope for rehabilitation.[15] In his genealogical critique of reason, Foucault shows how reason is not only embedded in sociocultural contexts and mediated by natural languages but also implicated in a complex network of power/knowledge—or what he calls each society's "regime of truth." Foucault's account of the "regime of truth" constitutive of Western modernity chronicles the inexorable march of reason, aided and abetted by the newly emergent human sciences, in setting up a social order geared to extend our mastery over both nature and culture. In that quest for mastery, reason is distilled as it becomes free of humanist trappings and reveals itself as an instrument of technical analysis, strategic calculation, and administrative control. Unlike Habermas, Foucault does not regard instrumental rationality as a disfiguration of reason that occurs under the compulsions of capitalist modernization or on account of being subject-centered. For Foucault, reason, knowledge, and truth can never escape from relations and effects of power because they are constitutive of each other. As Foucault notes: "Truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude. . . . Truth is the thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power."[16] Thus enmeshed with power, reason cannot disavow its strategic and instrumental character.

14. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vols. 1–2, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

15. See especially Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

16. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, trans. Colin Gordon and others, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 131.

Even in his later writings, when he shifts the focus of his investigations from "coercive practices" and the technologies of subjectification associated with modern institutions to "practices of freedom" and the arts of self-formation in everyday life, Foucault continues to think of reason in terms of power and strategy. In those later writings, especially while discussing Kant's essay "What Is Enlightenment?" Foucault gives a positive reading of modernity—as "an attitude . . . a mode of relating to contemporary reality"—which is distinctively Baudelairian.[17] To add to the alchemy, the crossing of Kant and Baudelaire is mediated by the Greek notion of *ethos*, and one of the conceptual strands of ethos valorizes the practice of "asceticism": A practice that once forged the "iron cage" now instructs us how to resist, if not dismantle, it.

A central concern of these later writings on the "care of the self" is to explore strategies (both conceptual and practical) for keeping power relations mobile and symmetrical and preventing them from ossifying into states of domination. Here Foucault turns to the Greek asceticism. For Greeks, in Foucault's account, the care of the self is the ethical horizon within which one engages in "proper" practices of freedom. That care requires one to master one's desires and appetites and refuse to be a slave to popular opinions and passions. Ethos is the concrete form of "being and behavior" in which one's free self-possession is made visible to others: "A person's ethos was evident in clothing, appearance, gait, in the calm with which he responded to every event, and so on. For the Greeks, this was the concrete form of freedom. . . . A man possessed of a splendid ethos, who could be admired and put forward as an example, was someone who practiced freedom in a certain way."[18] The care of the self as the practice of freedom also involves complex relationships with others. Abuse of power is characteristic of one who is not in possession of himself. One who masters himself through self-knowledge is capable of properly exercising power over others and thus taking his rightful place in the city or the household or any other congregation.

A key move in Foucault's synthesis involves linking the Greek notion of ethos as "the concrete form of freedom" with Baudelaire's conception of modernity and Kant's answer to the question "What Is Enlightenment?,"which inaugurates the philosophical discourse of modernity. What bridges the two concepts of mod-

17. See Foucault's two essays on Kant: "What Is Enlightenment?" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1 of *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 303–20, and "The Art of Telling the Truth," in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 139–48.

18. Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 286.

ernity is the questioning of the present: "What is my present? What is the meaning of this present? And what am I doing when I speak of this present?"[19]

As for Baudelaire, Foucault argues that modernity entails both a form of relationship to the present and to oneself. This gives the task of discovering "the eternal and the immovable" in the midst of temporal flux a new inflection: "The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; but it is to take oneself as the object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire in the vocabulary of his day, calls *dandysme*."[20] There is a striking similarity between the Greek view of the care of the self as summed up in the concept of ethos and "the asceticism of the dandy who makes his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art."[21] This is a crucial move because it undercuts the conservative critique of cultural modernity as a temperament that by privileging individual self-realization and by promoting adversary culture unleashes hedonistic impulses irreconcilable with the requirements of a well-ordered society. By foregrounding practices of freedom and the regimen of asceticism, Foucault gives the quest for and of the self an ethical dimension.

Similarly, Foucault finds in Kant's text "a new way of posing the question of modernity, not in the longitudinal relation to the Ancients, but in what might be called a 'sagital' relation to one's own present."[22] Kant, like Baudelaire, views modernity not as an epoch but as an attitude: "a mode of relating to contemporary reality." Moreover, that attitude or ethos of modernity finds its reflexive articulation in a distinctive "type of philosophical interrogation—one that simultaneously problematizes man's relations to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject" whose roots can be traced back to the Enlightenment. For Foucault's Kant, what is of enduring interest and what connects us to the Enlightenment is not its doctrinal substance, which is at any rate antiquated and fragmented, but rather its spirit of critique. The significance of the Enlightenment today, as always, is its call to those who would hear it to assume an attitude or to subscribe to "a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era."[23]

19. Foucault, "The Art of Telling the Truth," 141.
20. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" 311.
21. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" 312.
22. Foucault, "The Art of Telling the Truth," 141.
23. Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" 312.

Alternative Modernities

Assuming that modernity is best understood as an attitude of questioning the present, we might begin our explorations of alternative modernities, to which this volume of essays is committed, by asking, What is the status of that attitude today? It seems to me that the attitude of questioning the present is both pervasive and embattled: It is pervasive because modernity has gone global, and it is embattled because it faces seemingly irresolvable dilemmas. In fact, the very idea of alternative modernities has its origin in the persistent and sometimes violent questioning of the present precisely because the present announces itself as the modern at every national and cultural site today.

That questioning sometimes, especially in the West, takes the form of proclaiming the end of modernity. One might be justified in pronouncing the end of modernity in a narrow and special sense, as Jean-François Lyotard does.[24] But to announce the general end of modernity even as an epoch, much less as an attitude or an ethos, seems premature, if not patently enthnocentric, at a time when non-Western people everywhere begin to engage critically their own hybrid modernities. To be sure, there is a widespread feeling (intensified by the approaching end of a millennium) that we are at some sort of a turning point in the trajectory of modernity. That sense of being at the crossroads might have less to do with the ending of an era than with the fact that modernity today is global and multiple and no longer has a governing center and master-narratives to accompany it. Besides, even if modernity were ending, its end, as in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*,[25] will turn out to be an eternal duration, an endlessly fading twilight. In the meantime, we have to continue to think through the dilemmas of modernity, as the essays in this volume do, from a transnational and transcultural perspective.

However, to think in terms of alternative modernities does not mean one blithely abandons the Western discourse on modernity. That is virtually impossible. Modernity has traveled from the West to the rest of the world not only in terms of cultural forms, social practices, and institutional arrangements but also as a form of discourse that interrogates the present. That questioning of the present, whether in vernacular or in cosmopolitan idioms, which is taking place at every national and cultural site today cannot escape the legacy of Western discourse on modernity. Whoever elects to think in terms of alternative modernities (irrespective of one's location) must think with and also think against the tra-

24. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
25. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

dition of reflection that stretches from Marx and Weber through Baudelaire and Benjamin to Habermas, Foucault, and many other Western (born or trained) thinkers. This is evident, for instance, in the writings of Arjun Appadurai and Paul Gilroy, two scholars who have contributed significantly toward developing an "alternative modernities" perspective.[26] One can provincialize Western modernity only by thinking through and thinking against its self-understandings, which are frequently cast in universalist idioms. To think through and to think against mean to think with a difference—a difference that would destabilize the universalist idioms, historicize the contexts, and pluralize the experiences of modernity. But what is that difference? It is difficult to pin down.

To begin with, Western discourse on modernity is a shifting and hybrid configuration consisting of different, often conflicting, theories, norms, historical experiences, utopic fantasies, and ideological commitments. My portrait in the previous section is but one among many possible narratives of Western modernity, its dilemmas, and its future. Virtually every scholar on the subject has his or her own version of that narrative, and each version casts a different light on modernity. When viewed from different perspectives, modernity appears to have an almost iridescent quality; its contours shift depending on the angle of interrogation.

To think in terms of alternative modernities is to privilege a particular angle of interrogation. The obvious and common feature of the essays in this volume (except for those by Charles Taylor and Thomas McCarthy) is that they examine the career and dilemmas of modernity from a specific national/cultural site. What difference, if any, does a site-based reading of modernities make in our understanding and questioning of the present?

Certainly, a culture-specific and site-based reading complicates our understanding of the relationship between the two strands of modernity—societal modernization and cultural modernity. The tale of two modernities, however compelling it is for mapping the Western experience of modernity and its dilemmas, cannot be extended, without important modifications, to cover other theaters of modernity. While it is not a portable tale, neither is it wholly irrelevant because the key elements in the narrative are present and active in a variety of combinations at different national and cultural sites. What a site-based reading decisively discredits is the *inexorable logic* that is assigned to each of the two strands of modernity. The proposition that societal modernization, once activated, moves

26. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

inexorably toward establishing a certain type of mental outlook (scientific rationalism, pragmatic instrumentalism, secularism) and a certain type of institutional order (popular government, bureaucratic administration, market-driven industrial economy) irrespective of the culture and politics of a given place is simply not true. Nor does cultural modernity invariably take the form of an adversary culture that privileges the individual's need for self-expression and self-realization over the claims of the community. Still, many of the aforementioned cultural forms, social practices, and institutional arrangements do surface in most places in the wake of modernity. But at each national and cultural site, those elements are put together (reticulated) in a unique and contingent formation in response to local culture and politics.

Therefore, a minimal requirement for thinking in terms of alternative modernities is to opt for what Taylor in the essay included in this volume characterizes as a "cultural" as opposed to an "acultural" theory of modernity. An acultural theory describes the transition to modernity in terms of a set of culture-neutral operations, which are viewed as "input" that can transform any traditional society: "On this view, modernity is not specifically Western, even though it may have started in the West. Instead it is that form of life toward which all cultures converge, as they go through, one after another, substantially the same changes" (169). There are two basic errors in this theory. First, it fails to see that Western modernity itself is a "culture" with a distinctive moral and scientific outlook consisting of a constellation of understandings of person, nature, society, reason, and the good that is different from both its predecessor cultures and non-Western cultures. Second, it imposes a false uniformity on the diverse and multiple encounters of non-Western cultures with the allegedly culture-neutral forms and processes (science and technology, industrialization, secularization, bureaucratization, and so on) characteristic of societal modernization. In short, an acultural theory is a theory of convergence: The inexorable march of modernity will end up making all cultures look alike.

A cultural theory, in contrast, holds that modernity always unfolds within a specific cultural or civilizational context and that different starting points for the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes. Under the impact of modernity, all societies will undergo certain changes in both outlook and institutional arrangements. Some of those changes may be similar, but that does not amount to convergence. Different starting points ensure that new differences will emerge in response to relatively similar changes. A cultural theory directs one to examine how "the pull of sameness and the forces making for difference" interact in specific ways under the exigencies of history and politics to produce alternative

modernities at different national and cultural sites. In short, modernity is not one, but many.

What Taylor proposes is not entirely new. It is implicit in a great number of site-specific studies of modernities, including those in this volume. To think productively along the lines suggested by the idea of alternative modernities, we have to recognize *and* problematize the unavoidable dialectic of convergence and divergence. It is customary to think about convergence in terms of institutional arrangements, such as a market economy, a bureaucratic state, modes of popular rule, and so on. Similarly, one thinks of divergence primarily in terms of lived experience and cultural expressions of modernity that are shaped by what is variously termed the "habitus," "background," or "social imaginary" of a given people. An alternative modernities perspective complicates this neat dichotomy by foregrounding that narrow but critical band of variations consisting of site-specific "creative adaptations" on the axis of convergence (or societal modernization).

This idea of creative adaptation requires further elaboration. It does not mean that one can freely choose whatever one likes from the offerings of modernity. It is delusional to think, as the neoconservatives in the West and the cultural nationalists in the non-West seem to do, that one can take the good things (i.e., technology) and avoid the bad (i.e., excessive individualism). To be sure, one can question (as McCarthy does in this volume) the scope and viability of creative adaptation in certain critical areas such as modern law where form and function (and the reflexive discourse about form and function) are tightly integrated. While coming up with indigenous and culturally informed "functional equivalents" to meet the imperatives of modernization is an important task of creative adaptation, that sort of institutional innovation does not exhaust its scope or reveal its true spirit. Creative adaptation (as the essays in this volume show) is not simply a matter of adjusting the form or recoding the practice to soften the impact of modernity; rather, it points to the manifold ways in which a people question the present. It is the site where a people "make" themselves modern, as opposed to being "made" modern by alien and impersonal forces, and where they give themselves an identity and a destiny.

The phrase "creative adaptation" has a positive ring to it. But it does not always succeed; sometimes it is doomed to fail because one is looking for the impossible, as Elizabeth A. Povinelli shows (in this volume) in the case of the Australian quest to find that lost object called "native tradition" that would enable a modern "settler" nation to fulfill its moral and legal obligation to its indigenous population. The attempt at creative adaptation that one finds in that fantastic saga is not so much an instance of institutional innovation, although there is plenty of that,

but one of a people struggling to find their moral footing. Here, as in every other site-based essay in this volume, we catch glimpses of a larger conception of creative adaptation as an interminable process of questioning the present, which is the attitude of modernity. Precisely in this sense, modernity is an incomplete project and necessarily so.

Creative adaptation is not necessarily an inward movement of mobilizing the resources of one's culture to cope with the seemingly irresistible cognitive and social changes that accompany modernity. Such a construction is too passive and suggests a mood of embattled resignation. Modernity is more often perceived as lure than as threat, and people (not just the elite) everywhere, at every national or cultural site, rise to meet it, negotiate it, and appropriate it in their own fashion. Pick any non-Western metropolis early in this century, such as Leo Ou-fan Lee's Shanghai in the 1930s (this volume) or Dipesh Chakrabarty's Calcutta in the 1940s (this volume), and you see the rage for modernity. Everything in sight is named modern: "modern coffee house," "modern talkies," "modern bicycle shop," "modern tailor," "modern beauty salon," "modern bakery," a newspaper called *Modern Age*, a magazine for the "modern woman," an advertisement for the "modern kitchen," a call for "modern education," an agitation for "modern hygiene," and so on. Those who submit to that rage for modernity are not naive; they are not unaware of its Western origins, its colonial designs, its capitalist logic, and its global reach. In haphazardly naming everything modern, they are exercising one of the few privileges that accrue to the latecomer: license to play with form and refigure function according to the exigencies of the situation. Thus, in the face of modernity one does not turn inward, one does not retreat; one moves sideways, one moves forward. All of this is creative adaptation. Non-Western people, the latecomers to modernity, have been engaged in these maneuvers now for nearly a century. Everywhere, at every national or cultural site, the struggle with modernity is old and familiar. In some places, as in Beatriz Jaguaribe's Rio de Janeiro (this volume), modernity is already in ruins. That is why the language and lessons of Western modernity and a comparative study of its global receptions are an integral part of any reflexive theory and practice of creative adaptation.

An alternative modernities perspective is equally vigilant in exploring the elusive and fragmentary band of similarities that surface unexpectedly on the axis of divergence. It is generally assumed that the lived experience and the embodied character of modernity vary vastly from site to site. This is not entirely correct. Though cultural modernity is conventionally seen as both the machinery and the optic for the limitless production of differences, such difference always functions

within a penumbra of similarities, and such similarities may be seen in the style of the flaneur, the mystique of fashion, the magic of the city, the ethos of irony, or the anxiety of mimicry—all ineffable yet recognizable across the noise of difference. What is common to these strings of similarities is a mood of distance, a habit of questioning, and an intimation of what Bauldelaire calls the "marvelous" in the midst of the ruins of our tradition, the tradition of the new. Whether these common intensities, which regularly find expression in popular media, especially in film and music, will one day pave the way for an ethic of the global modern remains to be seen.

Thus, just as societal modernization (the prime source of convergence theories) produces difference through creative adaptation or unintended consequences, so also cultural modernity (the prime source of divergence theories) produces similarities on its own borders. This double relationship between convergence and divergence, with their counterintuitive dialectic between similarity and difference, makes the site of alternative modernities also the site of double negotiations —between societal modernization and cultural modernity and between hidden capacities for the production of similarity and difference. Thus, alternative modernities produce combinations and recombinations that are endlessly surprising. The essays in this volume chronicle the range of surprises and submit the following tentative conclusions: *Everywhere, at every national/cultural site, modernity is not one but many; modernity is not new, but old and familiar; modernity is incomplete and necessarily so.*

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