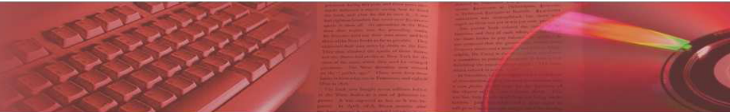

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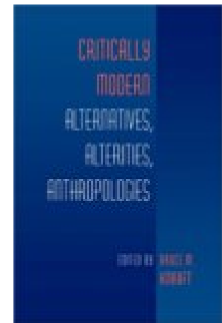

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A Critical Look at Ways of Being Modern

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While the common starting point in numerous social-scientific discourses has been the assumption that Western culture is intrinsically interwoven with the development of modernity, the recent discussion of multiple or vernacular modernties has presented an alternative perspective. By rejecting the idea that the West provides a yardstick by which other societies should be measured, the new discourse highlights the blending, transgression, and cross-fertilizing processes between cultures rather than opposition between them. The polycentric conception of modernity has suggested interconnecting and intersecting processes between societies on the levels of politics, religion, science, and everyday cultural and subjective experiences, against discourses which identify the world in binary and essentialist terms. As Nilufer Gole explains, this new discourse "attempts to reintroduce some of the pluralistic features of Western modernity that were repressed, marginalized, or simply forgotten on the side paths of modernity's historical and intellectual trajectory." On a global scale, these "pluralistic features" would also involve processes by which the West has perceived itself through colonizing non-Western societies, and the way in which such colonized societies have accordingly interpreted themselves in various historically specific and indigenously unique ways.

This edited volume, with a collection of essays (some of them highly original) by ten anthropologists and cultural theorists, is a fascinating contribution to this new discourse. With a nice blend of ethnography and theory, these essays increase our capacity to understand modernity not only in terms of various trajectories and divergent patterns neglected by modernist social-scientific discourses, but also in the ways in which discourses about modernities reproduce those very modernist understandings that theorists are trying to overcome. One of the principle contributions of this book is the testimony it provides to the diversity of modernity in the local, everyday, and living context. Just as valuable is its description of the ebb and flow of practices of gender, ethnicity, race, and class. With an emphasis on the capitalistic institutional influences and stratifying consequences to the processes of globalization, the authors invite us to a still more complicated understanding of modernity, as the final essays in the volume assess discussions about modernity and the rhetorical ways such discourses reproduce older, hegemonic debates on being modern. Here, "modernity" is not merely a possible sociological reality, but a discursive construct. For these authors, the task at hand to filter "key concepts and articulate them with each other runs up against the sociology of our own knowledge" (p. 35). In this sense, with an entertaining blend of easily digested theory mixed with illuminating case studies and imaginative arguments, the contributors raise the possibility to articulate modernity not only in alternative ways, but also force us to conceptualize alternatives to modernity.

Critically Modern is structured in three parts with a total of ten chapters that begin with a succinct (though long) introductory essay by Bruce M. Knauft, explaining the current debate and the ongoing discussions that conceptualize modernity according to native and local systems of values, languages, and ideologies in the context of global capitalism. At this point, Knauft provides an historical account of modernity, along with a broad description of social-theoretical views on the problems of modern (Western) societies. While assessing both the classical and contemporary social-theoretical approaches for failing to acknowledge the cultural and symbolic dimensions, modernity is defined here as "the images and institutions associated with Western-style progress and development in a contemporary world" (p. 18). In other words, the symbolic and cultural orientation, in its Western disguise, constitutes an integral aspect of modernity. With this definition in mind, the author further expands the ways in which modernity has been relativized by certain social theorists, and contextualized in cultural and subjective orientations.

In the following chapters, the reader encounters essays that aim to analyze distinct features of indigenous cultures, as they are practiced in their locally specific ways by underscoring the possibility of different experiences of being modern with significant divergences, constraints, and contestations as a result of unequal processes of globalization (part 1). The authors of some essays (part 2) deal with modernity in terms of self-other relations–that is, the ways in which practices of being modern are deeply intertwined with processes of altertiy of Others as the central aspect of Western self-fashioning. Some other contributors (part 3), however, engage with the very academic discourse of "modernity" as a vague and misleading debate that creates more problems than provides solutions. In chapter 1, titled "Bargains with Modernity in Papua New Guinea and Elsewhere," Robert Frost discusses modernity in terms of lived experiences of native lives based on his ethnographic case study of Aganen ritual use of money in Papua New Guinea. According to Frost, Giddens's notions of distanciation (i.e., "stretching" of social relations across time and space in ways that interaction can be administered by a superordinate authority) and disembedding (i.e., abstract apparatuses that detach social relations from localities and extend them across indefinite spans of time-space) can help us to understand the flexible and subjective ways Papua Guineans contest, negotiate, and redefine uses of money for their own interests. This chapter questions the illusion of symmetrical modernities in their relativistic, power-free, and multiple forms reproduced through concepts like "multiculturalism." It also suggests that, despite its inherent problems, the concept of modernity should not be discarded, but should be reconceptualized with a comparative emphasis on lived experiences in specific localities and how they are connected with patterns of global socio-processes.

Chapters 2 and 3 bring to view the paradoxes inherent to modernity. Ivan Karp in "Development and Personhood: Tracing the Contours of a Moral Discourse" argues that development discourse, central to discussions on modernization, in fact entails ideological features of colonialist and orientalist thinking that is rearticulated through certain agencies, institutions, organizations (NGOs), and policies on a global scale. While couching itself in neutral and universalistic tropes, this discourse reproduces hierarchical conceptions of self and other in terms of "developed" and "undeveloped" societies while defining these unequal relations as exceptions whose very exceptionalism requires assistance by professionals and institutions that continue to (re)produce the discourse of development. In this sense, "development discourse creates both the material to be transformed and defines the process of transformation" (p. 97). In the conclusion, Karp reminds us, however, that these notions continue to be contested, as the notion of development is reshaped and takes on different meanings in locally expressive ways.

Knauft's essay, titled "Trials of the Oxymodern: Public Practice at Nomad Station," is an impressive ethnographic study of the Gebusi of south Lowland Papua New Guniea, their concept of being modern in contrasting relation to their (re)enactment of tradition in secondary and subservient terms. Since the Gebusi never experienced colonialism (at least, not until the 1960s) and held on to many of their native traditions, their encounter with modernity has been more on the subjective and cultural one, namely through institutions created by outsiders, like "Nomad churches, school, market, sports league, and government projects" (p. 108). For the Gebusi people, modernity is conceptualized by redefining traditional practices through (re)enactments while, simultaneously, engaging with these institutions and their cultural practices. Tradition is reconstructed in the new constructed public cultural spheres of everyday life. For Knauft, the term "oxymodern" signifies the desire to be modern through refashioning of native traditions and practices, in which the quest to become modern is filled with tension and made problematic. This tension, however, between the indigenous desire for progress in

becoming modern and the lack of economic progress renders people like the Gebusi to keep the vernacular and the modern apart while simultaneously bringing them close together. For Knauft, alternative modernity, rather than simply creating an alternative form of modernity, in fact both empowers and disempowers the natives, since the understanding of being modern in terms of desire for progress is closely tied to the unequal conditions in which demands for a modern way of livings are made.

In perhaps the most original essay in the volume (chapter 4), Holly Wardlow discusses the cultural dimensions of modern commodities of the Huli people in the context of Melanesian modernity. Wardlow shows how the native ideas of becoming modern and sensibilities of progress are couched in contestation of homogenizing processes of commodification in gendered relational terms. She illustrates this by studying the criminal thieves, namely "rascals," associated mainly with men, and the planting ritual of commodities, associated mainly with women. Applying Michel-Rolph Trouillot's notion of "geography of imagination" (see chapter 7), this intriguing ethnography reveals the subjective ways that through production and the possibility of consumption Huli men and women experience different ways of being (and becoming) alternatively modern. According to Warlow, Huli notions of production, consumption, and value involve different practices of acquisition and display of commodities. This is best illustrated in the ways women are discouraged, in contrast to Hulli men, from wearing Western clothing–representing the role of tradition and antimodernism. Moreover, the ownership of commodities is lauded for men through the act of theft without the need for labor, in contrast to Huli women, and their status as the symbol of tradition, who acquire wealth through the act of physical labor. Central to this chapter is the relationship between gender and modernity, and the internal processes of alterity that create unequal experiences of becoming "authentically" modern in indigenous localities.

Chapters 5-7 lead us to an alternative plane of critical analysis. Lisa Rofel's can be understood as a theoretical expansion of Wardlow's study of the relationship between gender and modernity. By critically studying Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's famous book, *Empire*, Rofel argues how claims made in this book in fact reproduce an exclusionary concept of modernity by neglecting subaltern people, especially women and the disempowered populations. Here, Rofel reveals how, despite the use of Deleuze and Guattari's theories of power and subjectivity in decentral and rhizomatic terms, Hardt and Negri incorporate certain masculinist narratives in their critical analysis. This is mainly patent when the two authors ignore gender in their description of sovereignty, body politics, international division of labor, and the "new political hero of empire" (p. 185) by portraying "a singular world order characterized, they claim, by its totality, irresistibility, and irreversibility" (p. 181). For Rofel, the authors of *Empire* recreate the very hegemonic master narrative they aim to overcome. Our aim, however, should be to "develop an anthropology of intersecting global imaginations," (p. 189), in which it would include alternative narratives created by subaltern populations.

In a similar manner, though with the use of a different method, Debra A. Spitulnik, in her essay (chapter 6), argues that vernacular discourses of modernity have usually been built around colonial languages (mainly English), and shaped by patterns of colonial thinking. Using the Zambian case as a model, Spitulnik shows how linguistic uses of the term "modern" imply notions such as "being European" and "being enlightened," which are closely tied to the Western metadiscourses of modernization. What is interesting in this case, however, is that the term "modernity" defies any easy classification into a single concept, and that, in its postcolonial setting, the term takes on multiple meanings and significations in the Zambian everyday life. In this highly original study, Spitulnik criticizes the simple use of vernacular terms as a way to highlight indigenous notions of modernity by concluding that language is not "always a transparent window into culture" (p. 213). In this sense, she claims, modernity should be identified to maintain heuristic rather than substantive value; that is, it should be understood in the shifting and disparate linguistic practices of indigenous population in the context of colonial and postcolonial everyday aspirations and sensibilities. This study can be highly useful for methodologists and cultural theorists in that it underscores practices of modernity in ethnographic and linguistic forms.

In another remarkable essay (chapter 7), Michel-Rolph Trouillot forces us to rethink the problem of alterity conceptualized in discourses of modernity. Similar to Karp, though more sophisticated in his use of theory, Trouillot reminds us of the role of subaltern in terms of not just the south and north divide, between "advanced" and "backward" societies (which in fact dates back to precapitalistic times), but also in the way this system of exploitation has been ideologically grounded in the modern consciousness. In what he calls the "geography of imagination" of "North Atlantic universals," the moder-

nity continues to fashion itself through the processes of alterity; or as he puts it: "modernity always required an Other and an Elsewhere" (p. 224). Using Reinhart Koselleck's notion of regimes of historicity (i.e., conception of a past that has experienced a radical break from the present and the conception of future that is both attainable and indefinitely delayed), Trouillot convincingly argues that modernity was only able to create its own imagined reality through the process of subordination of Other in perceptions of space and time. In this sense, alternative modernities, in their non-Western form, were already present with the emergence of modernity.

Chapters 8-10 display the most critical dimension of this already critical set of essays. If modernity carries ideological and sociological elements, then discourses of modernity and being modern can be reified by theorists and everyday institutional settings in diverse and latent ways. The objective of these studies, therefore, is to identify and scrutinize the impact of modernity as an ideological construct, couched in terms such as "development" and "progress." "On Being Modern in a Capitalist World: Some Conceptual and Comparative Issues" (chapter 8), by Donald L. Donham, argues that modernity is a discursive space wherein "notions of the modern are articulated" (p. 244). In its primordial form, modernity is a contested idea that is constructed and reconstructed, negotiated and debated in a "public sphere of modernity" (p. 246). This field of discursive contestation is not only limited to the capitalistic global order, but also to its peripheries, the so-called "backward" societies, wherein ideas of being modern are contested. Chapter 9 reframes the debate on multiple modernity in the context of the discourse's historical and intellectual settings. Here, John D. Kelly provocatively argues that the new discourse of alternative modernities continues to be structured around the idioms of "modernists sublime," a language that continues to mystify rather than clarify in non-dialogical terms. Using the Bakhtinian notions of sublime and grotesque, Kelly criticizes the new discourse of alternative modernities in its emphasis on an abstract, indefinite conception in such that reifies it into a sublime reality. In order to speak of modernity "what we need is more than alternative modernities: we need a grotesque that can speak far more groundedly about the ways and means of contemporary power" (p. 262). In the final and the most self-reflective section of the book, "Modernity and Other Traditions," Jonathan Friedman questions the way each essay in the volume discourses on modernity. For Friedman, the language surrounding alternative modernities misleadingly blends dissimilar features and lumps them into a category, namely, modernity. Disparate ideas and diverse meanings are conflated into a continuous, structurally oriented and unified phenomenon. Central to this type of discourse is the inherent opposition between modernity and tradition, developed and underdeveloped, and the way in which this discursive essentialism inherently entails a point of contrast, a counter-concept in order to better mask its own rhetorical reality. The task at hand, however, is to distinguish the different uses of the term in diverse contexts by articulating both its explicit and implicit meanings.

This volume, however, suffers from two interrelated problems. As an anthropologist/sociologist of religion, I was puzzled by the fact that the authors neglected religion in their critical studies. At times, concepts like "culture," "symbolic," and "subjective" appear to be so conflated that they fail to explicate the so-called religious experience of modernity and the modernity of religious experience. At other times, it appears that religion may be another contested concept, as discussed in the final section of the book. The role of religion, in short, remains unclear in these studies. Why? Perhaps religion plays an implicit role in the discussions, as just another aspect of the "subjective"–in both its discursive and its sociological forms–of the indigenous societies under study. The assumption, however, I decode in these essays is that religion is part and parcel of the symbolic web of everyday practices that are specifically practiced in distinct localities. If so, then this could suggest that the authors, even those who criticize academic discourses for reifying terms such as modernity, are themselves guilty of reifying the concepts of culture and "subjectivity." If modernity, as both a discursive construct and a sociological phenomenon, is closely tied to a set of power relations in the context of distinct colonial histories, then how does "culture" transcend similar processes? Could possibly the notion of culture, so central to these studies, assume an alternative reality which defies disempowerment?

I am not suggesting that the respective authors are not aware of this problem (see the introduction, p. 35). I am, however, raising the following questions: to what extent are we able to use the concept of culture without conjuring up certain universalistic and reifying elements? And more importantly, in this critical spirit, what is the role of religion in the relationship between alternative local realities and modernity? These questions lead us to another problem, which is secularization. To use Talal Asad's provocative query, "what might an anthropology of the secular look like" in connection to the concerning critical discussions? Would the respec-

tive authors defend the belief in the myth of secularization? Would they accept the possibility of multiple secularizations in diverse localities on a global scale? Or would they identify secularization as a discursive construct, entailing ideological significance? If so, I wonder, how would the authors explain the global rise of so-called "public religions," so powerfully argued by Jose Casanova in 1994, in the context of the ongoing debate on modernity? These are questions that merit serious attention by anyone who theorizes on modernity.

The contributors could have also benefited from recent debates on modernity in the discipline of sociology. In *Theorizing Modernity*, for instance, Peter Wagner evokes similar arguments. Although approaching the topic from a different theoretical perspective, Wagner articulates a current tendency in sociology to conceptualize modernity in a cautious and self-conscious manner, to the extent to which the knowledge and the language used in describing modernity is constantly put into question and suspected of the danger of reification. Nevertheless, and perhaps similar to Foster's argument, according to Wagner social sciences should continue to provide critical diagnoses of the present human condition (in whatever "modern" form it may appear) despite the fact knowledge and its articulation will remain an impossible ideal to attain. This said, it should be remembered that *Critically Modern* is a book of considerable intellectual sophistication. Lively, shrewd, and persuasive, the publication of this informative book marks an important event in the ongoing debate on multiple modernities. I suspect that these essays will stand up well into the future when the burgeoning sub-field of alternative, multiple, or vernacular modernities will have established itself all the more firmly in the social-scientific curriculum. Similar to the publication of *Writing Culture* in 1986, when the volume became the standard text for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students for the critical study of ethnographic discourse, students and theorists interested in modernity will be poring over this text for some time to come. For students of ethnic, gender, cultural, and postcolonial studies, there is much here of ethnographical and theoretical interest. Anthropologists and sociologists, especially those interested in Giddens's theory of structuration and Wallersteinian notions of world-system, will profit from reflection on the efforts of the contributors to rethink modernity in this new critical way. Bruce M. Knauft is to be congratulated for assembling these essays, a volume that perhaps unleashes a new mode of (un)conceptualizing modernity.

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