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Multiple Modernities. The Transnationalisation of Cultures

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Abstract

During the past decade, processes associated with what is popularly though perhaps misleadingly known as globalization have come within the purview of anthropology. Migration and mobility – and the footloose or even rootless social groups that they produce – as well as the worldwide diffusion of commodities, media images, political ideas and practices, technologies and scientific knowledge today are on anthropology’s research agenda. As a consequence, received notions about the ways in which culture relates to territory have been abandoned. The term transnationalisation captures cultural processes that stream across the borders of nation states. Anthropologists have been forced to revise the notion that transnationalisation would inevitably bring about a culturally homogenized world. Instead, we are witnessing a surge of greatly increasing cultural diversity. New cultural forms grow out of historically situated articulations of the local and the global. Rather than left-over relics from traditional orders, these are decidedly modern, yet far from uniform. The essay engages the idea of the pluralization of modernities, explores its potential for interdisciplinary research agendas, and also inquires into problematic assumptions underlying this new theoretical concept.

Keywords: Anthropological culture concept, Modernity, Cultural Globalization, Transnationalisation, Ethnographic Research

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Multiple Modernities. The Transnationalisation of Cultures¹

During the past decade, globalization has come within the purview of anthropology. Today, migration, mobility and the social groups they produce – refugees, tourists, labor migrants – are on anthropology's research agenda. Increasingly, anthropologists study the cultural effects of the worldwide diffusion of commodities, technologies and media products, as new communication and transportation technologies bridge huge distances in ever briefer intervals of time, and release people from geographically restricted communities of interaction. Cultural artifacts – not just material things but also political ideas, scientific knowledge, images of the future and interpretations of the past – travel further and more swiftly than ever before. They are available simultaneously almost everywhere. However, their accessibility is restricted to those social actors who have the economic means or the cultural capital to make use of them.

As a consequence of these transformations, anthropologists have abandoned established notions of how culture relates to territory. Swedish social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz suggests that the well-established anthropological concept of cultures as “packages of meanings and meaningful forms, distinctive to collectivities and territories,” was put to a test when anthropologists started to take a closer look at this “increasing interconnectedness in space. As people move with their meanings, and as meanings find ways of traveling even when people stay put, territories cannot really contain cultures.”² Originally, the anthropological concept of culture referred to the way of life of a bounded social group in a fixed and clearly-defined geographical location or territory. Both the increased mobility and worldwide dispersal of populations, forming diasporas far from home, and the interpenetration of societies by things and ideas from elsewhere challenged the unspoken anthropological assumption that „culture sits in places“³. With globalization, cultures ceased being static objects. They would no longer hold still for ethnographers to portray them, as James Clifford, American historian and critical theorist of anthropology, so aptly put it: “Twentieth-century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and lan-

¹ A revised version of this essay will be published in Frank Schulze-Engler (ed.), *Transcultural English Studies. Proceedings of the 2004 Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL/GNEL)*.

² Ulf Hannerz, “Introduction,” in *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places*. (London/New York: Routledge, 1996): 8

³ Arturo Escobar, “Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization,” *Political Geography* 20 (2001)

guages.”⁴ As a consequence, cultural boundaries are much more difficult to fix, let alone map onto territorial divides, as communication channels transgress and migrant communities routinely cross them.

In anthropology, the term transnationalisation was adopted in order to capture those cultural processes that stream across the borders of nation states. ‘Transnational’ has increasingly become a blanket-term in anthropology to describe any cultural phenomenon that extends beyond or cross-cuts state boundaries and is an effect of the diffusion or dispersal of people, ideas and artifacts across huge distances, often in such a way that they stop being identified with a single place of origin. Anthropologists distinguish transnational processes from globalization. The latter they define as world-encompassing in scale, and embodied in economic and political processes whose protagonists are multinational corporations, national governments and supranational organizations. Conversely, the use of the term ‘transnational’ „draw[s] attention to the growing involvement of other kinds of actors - individuals, kinship groups, ethnic groups, firms, social movements, etc. - in activities and relationships that transcend national boundaries.“⁵ Aihwa Ong, a US-based anthropologist whose studies analyze the changing societies and cultures of contemporary Southeast Asia, asserts that transnationality as a term is best suited to symbolize the „condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space“ which has been intensified under late capitalism. According to Ong, the prefix ‘trans’

denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something. Besides suggesting new relations between nation-states and capital, transnationality also alludes to the transversal, the transactional, the translational, and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states of capitalism.⁶

The new concept of transnationalism in anthropology is not meant to reify a view of the world as „composed of sovereign, spatially discontinuous units“⁷ but rather intends to destabilize the very notion that cultures and societies are contained and indeed defined by the nation state.

⁴ James Clifford, “The Pure Products Go Crazy,” in *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 14.

⁵ Ulf Hannerz, „The Global Ecumene as a Landscape of Modernity,“ in *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places.* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996): 237. See also Ulf Hannerz, “Transnational Research,” in *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* ed. H. Russell Bernard (Walnut Creek, London, New Delhi: Altamira, 1998): 235–256.

⁶ Aihwa Ong. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality.* (Durham/London: Duke University Press 1999): 4.

⁷ Liisa Malkki. “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees,” in *Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference*, eds. James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta. *Theme Issue, Cultural Anthropology* 7.1 (1992): 27.

The Shifting Grounds of Transnational Ethnography

The reorientation that anthropology has undergone, however, is not only a response to perceived empirical changes on the ground but rather, a radical revision of the epistemological underpinnings of the discipline. Certainly, anthropologists in the past had been far from unaware of the translocal, even global relations and exchanges that the societies and cultures they studied were entangled in. Yet, more often than not, they tended to view these processes as influences and forces impacting on their object of study from the outside. In an important way, then, those connections and trajectories that tie the local to the global were considered peripheral to the concerns of the discipline. They were conceptualized as "externalities"⁸, placed outside the realm of anthropological research practices, and excluded from what the discipline considered its knowledge domain.

So, by focusing on the interpenetration of societies, and their increasing internal heterogeneity, anthropology reconfigured the culture concept and started to address new phenomena under the heading of transnationalism. As a consequence, methodological issues also came to the fore with unexpected urgency. Can anthropologists still do ethnography where they used to, in rural communities, in urban neighborhoods, in bounded social groups? The very constructedness of the notion of the field, and the epistemological groundings of ethnography as a "field science"⁹, became visible when anthropology started addressing cultures on the move. The challenge that new social phenomena of transnational mobility have begun to pose to anthropology made it evident that the field had never simply been "out there", but was always constructed by the anthropologist. It is not just a bounded place and social group that the anthropologist can discover and dwell among, but she or he sets the limits and defines the boundaries according to the conventions and rules of the discipline, most of them implicit and quite literally embodied in the practices of scholars doing fieldwork. In their volume 'Anthropological Locations', Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have pointed out that the idea of the bounded field site, and the notion of what anthropologists do in the field, constitute the core identity of anthropology. They criticize, not unlike Clifford, that the field seems so deceptively obvious a place that the complex processes that go into constructing it are obscured: "This mysterious space - not the 'what' of anthropology, but the 'where' - has been left to common sense, beyond and below the threshold of reflexivity."¹⁰ These authors perceive as the most pressing problem for anthropology that, while the discipline obviously has shifted its attention to translocal phenomena, its practice and its identity remains deeply implicated in an intensely local, immobile research method.

A number of other anthropologists as well have raised the point that ethnography, conventionally understood as long-term participant observation in a narrowly circumscribed locale such as a village or a tribal community, is not particularly suited for research perspectives on transnational cultural processes. Fieldwork is a localizing, a

⁸ Marilyn Strathern. "Externalities in comparative guise," *Economy and Society* 31. 2 (2002).

⁹ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson. "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology," in *Anthropological Locations. Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* eds. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)

¹⁰ Gupta/Ferguson, "Discipline and Practice," 5.

place-making knowledge practice. In a double sense, as the culture to be observed is fixed in place by anchoring the field in a specific and concrete geographical location, and as the fieldworker locates herself or himself by establishing a bodily presence in this chosen place for a lengthy period of time, often a year or longer. In conventional ethnography, mobility is the privilege of the fieldworker who arrives from elsewhere and will again depart after her or his time is up. The privilege, however, is suspended during the actual period of fieldwork. Conversely, the people under study are thought to be immobile in a sustained manner. Obviously, then, anthropology was not particularly well-equipped in research methods when it came to the increase of transcultural mobility and communication that we are witnessing on an almost global scale. The classic approach of ethnography, the community study, turned out to be a slow and clumsy instrument under conditions of transnationalisation. In recent years, the way in which ethnography has privileged perspectives on local communities and sedentary populations has been criticized vehemently.¹¹ James Clifford suggests that instead we should see local communities

as much as a site of travel encounters as of residence. [...] To press the point: Why not focus on any culture's farthest range of travel while also looking at its centers, its villages, its intensive fieldsites? How do groups negotiate themselves in external relationships, and how is a culture also a site of travel for others?¹²

Sparked by this discontent, new methodological approaches were created, most notably the suggestion put forward by George Marcus to make ethnography multi-sited. The fields of multi-sited ethnography are constituted by migration routes, communication channels, commercial transactions, by lines of conflict and interfaces of contact alike. Mobile research projects are designed to connect various geographical sites and to bridge the distances separating them.

Ethnography moves from its conventional single-site location, contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the 'local' and the 'global', the 'lifeworld' and the 'system'.¹³

As the site of ethnography can no longer be presupposed to be an unproblematic given, before a fieldworker can engage in multi-sited research, he or she has to discover the trajectories of mobility and track the far-flung relations of communication that connect a

¹¹ See Gisela Welz, "Moving Targets. Feldforschung unter Mobilitätsdruck" *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* II (1998); Gisela Welz, "Siting Ethnography. Some observations on a Cypriot highland village," in *Shifting Grounds. Experiments in Doing Ethnography*. eds. Ina-Maria Greverus, Sharon Macdonald, Regina Römhild, Gisela Welz and Helena Wulff. *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures* 11 (2002)

¹² James Clifford. "Traveling Cultures," in *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1997): 25.

¹³ George E. Marcus. „Ethnography In/Of the World System: the Emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95.

social setting to others. The effects of this paradigm shift have made themselves felt not only in methodological discourse, as

[t]hinking in terms of multi-sited research provokes an entirely different set of problems that not only go to the heart of adapting ethnography as practices of fieldwork and writing to new conditions of work, but challenge orientations that underlie the entire research process that has been so emblematic for anthropology.¹⁴

Clearly, the advantages of mobile ethnography have been most evident in the anthropological exploration of transnational phenomena. The ready adoption of this innovative methodology, and of the new research agenda that goes with it, is predicated on a shift of attention in anthropology, away from isolated small-scale units towards social formations and cultural practices that transgress national boundaries, are dispersed geographically, and link local with translocal social actors and institutions.

Global Standards, Local Diversity

Many of the new research concerns of anthropology – not just migration and mobility, but media and computer mediated communication, statehood and supra-national governance, commodities and consumption, science and technology – today entail a turning-away from the more established patterns of doing fieldwork and writing ethnography. Yet, what remains unchanged about ethnographic fieldwork and what gives it its special advantage over other, less engaged and more distant methods of research is that field-workers immerse themselves in the everyday lives of the people they study, becoming participant observers of social practices as they unfold. „In fieldwork you live where people live, you do what people do, and you go where people go.“ Anthropologist James Watson states that „increasingly, all over the world, people are going to McDonald’s; they are also going to shopping malls, supermarkets, and video stores. If anthropologists do not start going with them, we will soon lose our *raison d’être*.“¹⁵ Watson, along with a team of East Asian colleagues in anthropology, decided to do just that, to accompany people going to McDonald’s in five Asian metropolitan areas, Taipei, Hong Kong, Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing. The anthropologists Yunxiang Yan, James Watson, David Wu, Sangmee Bak and Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney contributed to the book “Golden Arches East” which contains five case studies, exploring „how McDonald’s worldwide system has been adapted to suit local circumstances in five distinct societies.“¹⁶ The team found out that East Asian consumers have managed to transform McDonald’s into local institutions and that this localization process has spawned McDonald’s restaurants that not only differ from those in the US or in Germany, but also show considerable variation between the East Asian cities studied. What consumers

¹⁴ George E. Marcus. *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 3.

¹⁵ Watson, James K., ed. *Golden Arches East. McDonalds in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) viii

¹⁶ Watson, *Golden Arches East*, lx.

actually do when they frequent the hamburger place is very different from city to city, as are the cultural meanings that they are afforded: a popular after-school place for high school students where they do their homework, a place for three-generation-family outings on a weekend, or else the equivalent of a high-priced restaurant where nouveau riche couples go for dinner. The book is an enjoyable read and quite convincing in presenting evidence that the spread of fast food does not necessarily undermine the integrity of indigenous cuisines, nor can fast food chains unproblematically be called agents of global cultural homogenization. The study can be criticized, of course, for not paying sufficient attention to socioeconomic inequities within the societies studied, to problematic labor relations within McDonalds, or to the detrimental ecological effects of food production for hamburger empires. However, the special achievement of the study is that it takes the term McDonaldization literally and examines the empirical value of the term. In popular social science discourses this had become a synonym for the negative dimensions of globalization, for Americanization and cultural imperialism. Yet, instead of finding cultural standardization, the researchers were confronted with a new cultural diversity as McDonalds is adapted and effectively indigenized in the various settings.

Anthropology had started to study globalization with the expectation and indeed fear that globalization would bring about a culturally homogenized world. Instead, the discipline was witnessing a surge of greatly increasing cultural diversity, an observation that contradicted everything that anthropologists were led to believe. Anthropology had come into being as a scholarly enterprise inquiring into pre-modern societies. Historically, the discipline of anthropology emerged as a systematic attempt to learn about traditional cultures who often did not possess written records of their history and cultural heritage. The specific methodology of ethnographic research – fieldwork and participant observation – was developed to meet this challenge. Throughout much of the 19th and 20th century, anthropologists were intent on recording and salvaging traditional cultures before they crumbled under the onslaught of modernization. The global transformations underway today – the increase of transnational migration, the intensification of economic exchanges, and the global reach of media and consumer culture – in a sense are the epitome of the process of modernity writ large, a global expansion and intensification of modernization. What modernization had fallen short of, the production of a single unified world culture, globalization for sure would achieve. This is what anthropologists assumed, as for decades they had observed the incursion of monetary economies and capitalist markets into tribal life worlds and indigenous social systems, turning them inside out and mangling them beyond recognition, leaving populations adrift in the rapidly growing urban slums of Third World mega-cities, bereft of their identities and cultural meanings. Globalization has intensified these modernization processes. In its wake, there has not been a significant alleviation of poverty in many post-colonial societies, and the social inequalities within these societies, and between them and the prosperous and powerful societies of the West, have deepened. Meanwhile, new links of economic and political relations have been forged that often are called neo-colonial.

Yet, culture difference has not disappeared, quite the contrary. Culturally, globalization is having some unexpected and indeed contradictory effects. It has not led to the emergence of a single, unified world culture. Of course, we can observe the worldwide diffusion of modern institutions – the bureaucratic state, formal education, mass

media and telecommunications, health systems and military infrastructures. The globalization of the capitalist economy has left no society on earth untouched. However, the consequences of these processes are – in spite of all prognoses and prophecies – not the same everywhere.¹⁷ The globalization of modernity has produced both sameness and difference; uniformisation and differentiation are evolving side by side. Even though globally standardized institutions and practices are being introduced and adopted all over the world, the increased interaction between societies does not automatically lead to any significant leveling of cultural contrasts. Rather, when local cultures interact with global imports, new amalgamations of tradition and modernity are produced that are unique to the time and place where they occur.

The global cultural economy

Thus, new cultural forms grow out of historically situated articulations of the local and the global:

The trappings of globalization – world markets, mass media, rapid travel, modern communication [...] have had the effect of greatly increasing cultural diversity because of the ways in which they are interpreted and the ways they acquire new meanings in local reception.¹⁸

In his attempt to theorize the global cultural economy for anthropology, Arjun Appadurai stresses the importance of mass mediated products – radio, television, music videos, movies – which in conjunction with migration processes come to the fore as „forces [...] that seem to impel (and some times compel) the work of the imagination.“¹⁹ This has been explored ethnographically by a number of anthropologists in their research on the audience reception of popular media formats. Sarah Dickey’s study of the significance of popular cinema for moviegoers in South India²⁰ and Lila Abu-Lughod’s interpretation of how Egyptian audiences respond to television serials²¹ show that viewers use „crucial moments of the serial to confront their own positions in their family, community, and class“²² and by doing so, diverge from intended interpretations. The new readings they create vary within an audience of viewers at one single location, as their responses are gendered and also specific to social classes and generations. Michael Herzfeld in his highly informative overview of anthropological work on media recep-

¹⁷ See Samuel N. Eisenstadt. *Die Vielfalt der Moderne*. (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2000)

¹⁸ Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 10

¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai, „Here and Now,“ in *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 4.

²⁰ Sara Dickey. *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²¹ Lila Abu-Lughod. „Modern Subjects: Egyptian Melodrama and Postcolonial Difference,“ in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 87–114.

²² Michael Herzfeld, „Media,“ in *Anthropology. Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society* (Malden/Oxford: Blackwell 2001): 301. See also Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood and Nation in Postcolonial India*. (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1999)

tion points to the new unexpected effects of cross-cultural media reception, such as the popularity of Indian films in Nigerian Hausa culture²³, and to the ways in which media consumption fuels a „creative retooling of social identities in interaction with media.“²⁴ His assessment resonates with Appadurai’s assertion that

the consumption of mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and in general agency [...] It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape.²⁵

For Appadurai, this is what links globalization with modernity. He claims that globalization marks an era where modernity is, as he puts it, „at large“. According to him, anthropology challenges conventional assumptions about modernization and has the potential to contribute to a new social theory of modernity. Once anthropology starts to systematically address as ‚sites of modernity‘ precisely those cultural situations it once sought out because they appeared to harbor relics of tradition, the discipline will reinvent itself as an anthropology of modernity. With this change, anthropology also abandons its earlier self-appointed task of documenting and salvaging traditional culture before they succumb to modernization. It is not, however, giving up its role as a prime witness and quite often also a plaintiff, accusing colonial powers and neocolonial actors of „transforming colonized peoples into alienated human beings, as commodity relations dissolve pre-existing cultural relations among people, uprooting them from former ways life“ and eroding their subsistence bases.²⁶ In an essay on the Anthropology of Modernity, Aihwa Ong asserts that „[t]hus emerged a strong anthropological tradition to study the varied impact of the capitalist juggernaut on native social forms, subjectivity, and social change“.²⁷

Anthropologists, then, have always been close observers of what is actually happening when Western institutions are making incursions in non-Western societies. One of the most prominent voices in anthropology, Clifford Geertz, who is well known for revolutionizing anthropological epistemology with his approach to cultural interpretation, namely thick description, is also most knowledgeable and critical of so-called development in Third World countries. Four decades of fieldwork engagement with communities in Morocco and Indonesia have given him unique insights into how social change plays out on the ground, how ‚progress‘ impacts on the everyday lives of communities, and what choices local people actually make when confronted with new options. In his book ‘After the Fact’, Geertz weaves a rich, ethnographically informed tale

²³ Brian Larkin, „Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers: Media and the creation of parallel modernities,” *Africa* 67.3 (1997): 406–439.

²⁴ Herzfeld, „Media,” 308.

²⁵ Appadurai, „Here and Now,” 7.

²⁶ Aihwa Ong, „Modernity: Anthropological Aspects,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001): 9945.

²⁷ Aihwa Ong, „Modernity: Anthropological Aspects,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001): 9944.

of this change, a change that is not so much a „parade that can be watched as it passes“²⁸, following prescribed stations – traditional, modern, postmodern, or else feudal, colonial, independent –, but a discontinuous and disjunctive process. It progresses by leaps and halts rather than smoothly, and, in its course, spawns surprising and largely unintended effects. Modern life in Morocco is totally unlike that in Indonesia, and both bear little semblance to France or the United States. Geertz is at his best when he gives a thick description of an improvised and quite innovative ceremony in an Indonesian community.²⁹ The public event he selects is a graduation ceremony for adult students of an English language course. The course had been organized and marketed by the enterprising leader of a Muslim school of religious instruction. As if this concurrence was not incongruous enough, the ceremony described by Geertz turns out to be a hybrid event, hardly being able to contain the contradictory cultural currents it tries to combine, some local, some national, some global, some Muslim and some Western. Geertz reports how this event generates ironic self-reflection and puzzlement in the audience and, by extension, he evokes these responses in the readers of his book.

Poetic insights such as the ones afforded by a master like Geertz resonate with many other situations around the world, where cultural diversity, hybridity and ironic effects are generated when local populations appropriate globally distributed commodities and media products – even if these are only hamburgers or music videos. Modernization and globalization are but two sides of the same coin. Observations of the contradictory and highly productive cultural effects of globalization can be linked fruitfully to a theory of modernity that incorporates the anthropological attention given to everyday life, social agency and the ways in which people give meaning to the circumstances in which they find themselves. The globalization of modernity that we experience today indeed has from its inception been part and parcel of the trajectory of modernity which has always been inherently global in scope and intent.³⁰

Multiple Modernities

Anthropology engages with the place that cultural difference and cultural diversity occupy in the modern world. Ulf Hannerz, with his lively interest in the to and fro of cultural flows between the centers and peripheries of the world, and the resulting hybrid and creolized cultural expressions, asks the question outright, „How does modernity go with cultural difference?“ He himself subscribes to a view of „modernity as a civilizational complex, spreading globally, affecting the cultures of ever more societies, and at the same time being itself reshaped in those locations,“³¹ resulting in a heightened degree of diversity within interconnectedness, new cultural forms, expressions and inter-

²⁸ Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact. Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1995): 4.

²⁹ See Geertz, *After the Fact*, 143–151.

³⁰ Obviously, colonialism shares many important characteristics with modernization and globalization. It has been suggested that both colonial subjects and representatives of power have already been modern for centuries as they were part of the world-encompassing story-and-map of modernity. See Peter J. Taylor, *Modernities. A Geohistorical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

³¹ Hannerz, „Landscape of Modernity,“ 48.

pretations that are unique to the societies that employ them and can no longer be classified according to simple dichotomies of non-Western tradition and Western modernity.

Hannerz suggests two perspectives that may capture this state of affairs: „As the civilization of modernity enters into contact with other cultures, changes and refractions result, so that one may see it alternatively as one increasingly internally diverse civilization or as multiple modernities.“³² While Hannerz himself has been leaning towards the former notion, that modernity forms a framework in which cultural diversity manifests itself, an increasingly vocal group of his colleagues in anthropology have opted for the latter notion, proposing that each society or social group generates its very own version of modernity that is unlike any other. So wherever we go, there are particular regional forms of modernity. These cannot simply be explained by the presence of relics of tradition that co-exist with modern elements. Rather, this recent theoretical innovation in anthropology, talking of multiple or plural modernities, of the „alternatively“³³ or „otherwise“³⁴ modern, attempts to solve the „paradox that people in different world areas increasingly share aspirations, material standards, and social institutions at the same time that their local definition of and engagement with these initiatives fuels cultural distinctiveness.“³⁵

To talk of multiple modernities effectively collapses any contradiction or conflict between being modern and adhering to local cultural practices and beliefs. Rather, the notion of „alternative modernity“ acknowledges the fact that in each society, there is a „social and discursive space in which the relationship between modernity and tradition is reconfigured“, as Bruce Knauff against the backdrop of his many years of ethnographic work in Melanesia points out. He adds that this “reconfiguration is forged in a crucible of cultural beliefs and orientations on the one hand, and politicoeconomic constraints and opportunities on the other.“³⁶ In a brilliant survey essay, Joel Kahn summarizes recent moves in anthropology to pluralize the modern. As an illustration, he employs his own ethnographies of Malaysian and Indonesian society and points out that these countries today can easily be interpreted as "wanting: modern perhaps, but incompletely modern at best", particularly according to standards set by conventional modernization theory which inevitably raises points such as the "incomplete separation of public and private", meaning incomplete secularization and the strong role of religion in public life, or the "failure of differentiation of economic and political spheres", referring to social relations labeled from a Western perspective as patronage and nepotism.³⁷ "Measured against the yardstick of modernist narratives," Kahn continues,

Malaysia and Indonesia become 'other to the modern' in significant ways, forcing us back into the language of a liberal social evolutionism in which otherness was constituted as historically anterior to and, as a re-

³² Hannerz, „Landscape of Modernity,“ 44.

³³ Bruce M. Knauff, „Critically Modern. An Introduction,“ in *Critically Modern. Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, ed. Bruce M. Knauff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002): 1–54.

³⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, „The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot,“ in *Critically Modern. Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*. ed. Bruce Knauff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002): 220–237.

³⁵ Knauff, „Critically Modern,“ 2.

³⁶ Knauff, „Critically Modern,“ 25.

³⁷ Joel S. Kahn, „Anthropology and Modernity“, *Current Anthropology* 42. 5 (2001): 657.

sult, an incomplete or immature version of the modern, civilized self [...] Southeast Asia appears at best perversely modern, or to manifest various perverse forms of modernity. These may be explained away as premodern survivals or invented traditions, but neither explanation does much to come to grips with what is apparently unique to such places.³⁸

One possible answer to this predicament is to reconceptualise modernity in the plural. Multiple modernities is about „alternative constructions [...] in the sense of moral-political projects that seek to control their own present and future“³⁹, as Aihwa Ong succinctly puts it. These can no longer be denigrated as lacking or labeled non-modern, pre-modern, or traditional. This conceptual pluralization of modernities has been welcomed as a liberation within anthropological theoretical debates, breaking down the divide between tradition and modernity. It allows anthropologists to acknowledge as modern those cultural practices that co-exist with capitalist modernity but do not conform in any narrow way with the Western European or US American model of a modern way of life.. The Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that it is not sufficient to explain such forms as „inventions of tradition“ or through the idea of “the modernity of tradition“, because such „invocations of the restored, contrived, or resistant powers of a tradition accept the notion that there is a universal narrative of modernity, against which local variations can be measured.“⁴⁰ However, these are not residual elements or fragments of the past, nor simply an absence of modernity or indicators of its incomplete fulfillment. To talk of multiple modernities, then, means to explore the possibility of a heterogeneous account of the emergence of colonial modernity, as Timothy Mitchell points out in the introduction to the anthology ‚Questions of Modernity‘. Chakrabarty’s work has been especially evocative of how

colonialism has made European narratives a global heritage that inevitably structures any subsequent account of this modernity [...] A theme that emerges from studies of this kind is that in the production of modernity, the hegemony of the modern over what it displaces as ‘traditional’ is never complete. As a result, modernizing forces continuously reappropriate elements that have been categorized as non-modern, such as religious elements, in order to produce their own effectiveness [...] failures do not indicate the inability of modern secular politics to delimit the traditional powers of religion. They show that producing a colonial modernity requires the production of groups and forces designated as non-modern yet able to contest the hegemony of the modernist politics that called for them.⁴¹

³⁸ Kahn, „Anthropology and Modernity,“658.

³⁹ Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 23.

⁴⁰ Timothy Mitchell, „Preface,“ in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. . Timothy Mitchell. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): xvi.

⁴¹ Mitchell, „Preface,“ xix and xviii. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, „Witness to Suffering: Domestic Cruelty and the Birth of the Modern Subject in Bengal,“ in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press:2000b): 49–86

The different versions of modernity that are generated in different places, then, are no longer to be seen as mere aspects of the emergence of the ‚real‘ modernity that are on the sidelines of the one plot that actually counts. Rather, anthropologists stress the fact that modernity is emerging outside of or on the margins of the geography of the West. These developments are not to be assessed as to what „their contribution to the singular history of the modern“⁴² is. Rather than at the grand designs of colonial power and modernizing states, anthropology starts looking at the local sites „where the modern is realized and continually translated, in its articulation with and production of the non-modern“⁴³. And this may happen at a neighborhood grocery, a village school, a video store, a fast food parlor, but also in a government office, a conference room, or a research lab. Anthropology’s fieldwork approach leads us to look closely at sites where we can observe modernity as it is socially produced, in the actual social practices of people who are engaged in the making of modernity.⁴⁴

Recapturing the Critical Potential of Anthropology

In adopting this stance, social theory has come a long way from the 1960s and its conventional modernization theory, the epitome of which were standardized sociological measurements of the percentage degree of modernity acquired by individuals in so-called Third World countries.⁴⁵ To conceptualize modernity in the plural also implies stressing that each society has the right to determine how and to what end it wants to modernize. Yet, some cautions are in order. If the conceptual switch from emphasizing a divide between tradition and modernity to acknowledging a multiplicity of modern cultures entails merely a celebratory attitude towards the hybridity that is generated by local-global encounters, then anthropology would fall back into older habits of essentialising non-Western cultures as ‚others‘. Also, to indiscriminately declare contemporary cultural expressions as modern does not make sense, as it renders the designation meaningless. Joel Kahn warns that if we “reject any general understanding of modernity”, this may well be an “escape route out of modernity altogether”⁴⁶. By the same token, to suggest that all social practices are legitimate as long as they can be explained as expressions of ‘alternative modernity’ implies an irresponsibly relativist stance that uses the multiple modernities paradigm as an excuse to evade the responsibility of dis-

⁴² Mitchell, „Preface,“ xii.

⁴³ Mitchell, „Preface,“ xxvi.

⁴⁴ For exemplary case studies, see for instance Burawoy, Michael. „Introduction: Reaching for the Global,“ in *Global Ethnography. Forces, Connections, and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* eds. Michael Burawoy et al (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2000): 1–40.

⁴⁵ See Alex Inkeles & D.H. Smith. *Becoming Modern*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1974)

⁴⁶ Joel Kahn suggests to view modernity as a product of contradictory cultural processes rather than, as liberal modernization narratives and also their critiques imply, "a single cultural movement of liberty or discipline". Kahn asserts that these cultural processes entail a conflict between "autonomy" and "rationalization", rather than between tradition and modernity. He gives examples from his fieldwork among Malay muslims that show that "the theme of reconciling the apparently contradictory processes of rationalization ('globalization') and expressive meaning (understood as the expressive values of a particular people that were are wont to call their culture)" is central here as well. Kahn, „Anthropology and Modernity,“ 662.

sent, critique and engagement. To talk of multiple modernities cannot simply mean to recognize everybody as modern. If we do not at the same time make visible and critique the inequalities and power asymmetries that are being produced by a globalizing economy and the new geopolitical world order, then the designation otherwise modern or alternatively modern is simply another way of saying ‚backward‘, or of replacing the older labels ‚pre-modern‘ or ‚traditional‘.

As much as anthropology welcomes the paradigm shift, we cannot – and at our own peril, must not – ignore the fact that, of course, Western centers of power continue to consider themselves more modern than anybody else. At the same time, a number of supranational institutions continue to claim the right to assess the accomplishment of modernity by political systems, economies, and cultures around the world, and whether they deserve benefits, support and attention, or else are to be fined, sanctioned and boycotted for their lack of ‚good governance‘ and ‚best practices‘. Post-colonial scholar and social anthropologist Vassos Argyrou asserts that through the process of modernization, non-Western societies do not acquire a Western identity, rather, “they constitute themselves as Western subjects” while at the same time, “the West essentializes itself as the only true source of legitimate culture so that the practical manifestations of [non-Western] claims to modernity seem a poor version of the ‘original’.”⁴⁷ For Argyrou, it matters little whether we continue to use the term modernity in the single or plural mode as long as we do not pay attention to the mechanisms of domination and governmentality at work in the modern world order.⁴⁸ Timothy Mitchell has pointed out that modernity of the Western type always requires the non-universal, non-Western to define itself in contradistinction from. The mode of production of modernity depends on “what remains heterogeneous to it” as its constitutive outside:

Yet in the very processes of the subordination and exclusion, it can be shown, such elements infiltrate and compromise that history. These elements cannot be referred back to any unifying historical logic or any underlying potential defining the nature of capitalist modernity, for it is only by their exclusion or subordination that such a logic or potential can be realized. Yet, such elements continually redirect, divert, and mutate the modernity they help constitute.⁴⁹

Conclusion: Anthropology in and of modern societies

To adopt Mitchell’s notion allows us, to “acknowledge the singularity and universalism of the project of modernity”⁵⁰ and at the same time, to view modernity as „something concrete, embedded in particular institutions and cultural formations, but also a singular

⁴⁷ Vassos Argyrou, *Tradition and Modernity in the Mediterranean: The Wedding as Symbolic Struggle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 178.

⁴⁸ See also Vassos Argyrou, *Anthropology and the Will to Meaning. A Postcolonial Critique* (London: Pluto Press, 2002)

⁴⁹ Mitchell, „Preface,“ xiii.

⁵⁰ Mitchell, „Preface,“ 2 xiii.

process that is global and multicultural from its inception"⁵¹. Ultimately, this calls on anthropology not only to reveal the many versions of modernities in non-Western societies, but rather, to apply this research perspective to ourselves, to our own position as German, British, Swiss or American scholars. Anthropologists need to historicize and cross-culturally compare their very own versions of modernity. As Joel Kahn points out, this new anthropology of modernity "compels us towards an ethnographic engagement with modernity in the West"⁵² and, incidentally, picks on some longstanding research interests, especially among anthropologists of Europe, who have been exploring the distinct formations of European modernities and their historical and cultural specificities.⁵³ This resonates strongly with Dipesh Chakrabarty's intention to unmask the particular historical trajectory and power formation that has made it possible for Europe to make a claim as to being everybody's heritage. Chakrabarty asserts that the „phenomenon of ‘political modernity’ – namely, the rule of modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise – is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe". He suggests to engage in an operation he calls the provincializing of Europe, as

European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody's heritage and which affect us all – may be renewed from and for the margins."⁵⁴

Anthropology may contribute to this operation once the discipline becomes aware of the fact that – as Aihwa Ong⁵⁵ puts it – it is both an extension of modernity and an instrument for its undoing.

⁵¹ Kahn, „Anthropology and Modernity," 664.

⁵² Kahn, „Anthropology and Modernity," 663.

⁵³ See James D. Faubion, *Modern Greek Lessons. A Primer in Historical Constructivism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Jonas Frykman & Orvar Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Michael Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference. Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Rabinow, Paul. *French Modern. Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

⁵⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000a): 16.

⁵⁵ Ong, „Modernity," 994.

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