

Introduction

MODERNITY AND ITS DISCREPANT DESIRES

The deadly cold of winter had descended on Hangzhou. The sky was a wan yellow on the days it did not rain, and the biting air infiltrated every pore of my skin. The numbing weather, however, did nothing to deter the intensity of human activity that filled the streets I bicycled through on my way to and from the Zhenfu Silk Weaving Factory. It was the winter of 1986 and over the past year and a half, the Chinese government had cautiously instituted a set of policies in urban areas, known as economic reform. They were part of the "Four Modernizations"¹ through which the state hoped to pull China out of the Maoist era and into a position of leadership in the new world order. I lived in the university end of town, just north of the famous West Lake, whose serene beauty had inspired much of classical Chinese painting and now attracted a steady stream of tourists, both domestic and foreign. Elegant parasol trees imported earlier in the century from France shaded the spacious streets at this end of town. Behind them, at a distance from the road, stood new high-rise apartment buildings with the latest amenities. Married professors and cadres associated with the two major universities resided in them. Farther down, parklike estates rimmed the lake's perimeter. They had once belonged to the elite, before the socialist revolution. Since the revolution, army cadres and their families had moved in. It was said (discreetly) that Lin Biao, the man designated to succeed Mao but accused of plotting against him during the Cultural Revolution, had once occupied the mansion on the south side of the lake that currently served as a three-star hotel for foreigners.

Each morning, I left this area of town behind, riding my bicycle out the

sequestered gate of the university guest house for foreigners, through the bustling "free market" that was edging out the languishing state-run market adjacent to it. The free market was filled with people from the countryside selling live fish and chickens, mounds of tangerines and apples, and an assortment of beancurd products and vegetables. I rode on down the street past tentative neon signs of newly emerging cafes that stayed open late into the night. Skirting the east side of the lake, I made my way through the downtown area, alive with numerous small shops overflowing with consumer goods; the free market in clothing, where mainly young men sold the latest fashions; and elaborate hotels for foreigners, which most Chinese were forbidden to enter. Joining the wheel-to-wheel bicycle traffic of people on their way to work, I wended my way over to the east end of town, to the long-established working-class neighborhood where the silk factories are located.

The east end of town was a maze of narrow, dense streets. Bicyclists and buses jostled with laborers pulling or pedaling carts filled with everything from concrete slabs to new refrigerators and even elderly parents. Zhenfu was located inconspicuously among winding side alleys filled with the one-story, often one-room homes so characteristic of this neighborhood, with their sloping gray-tiled roofs and whitewashed plaster over brick. In this area of town, I could lose myself in the crush of people and almost forget I was a foreigner. Life spilled out of cramped homes onto the street. Women on their day off or already retired invariably sat out on the sidewalk to air the family commode, hang the wash, or knit, while older men played a leisurely game of chess or leaned against the house to sleep under the sun. Later in the afternoon, schoolchildren pulled their desks out on the sidewalk to catch the last rays of light. But in the mornings, workers crowded around the corner food stalls, gulping down beancurd soup and deep-fried crullers before heading off to work.

The Zhenfu Silk Weaving Factory stood imposingly at the end of one such alley. Occupying the space of several square city blocks, it was walled off from the neighborhood. Yet the low family dwellings, many of which had served as household workshops before the revolution, still hugged the wall, as if not wanting those inside to forget their history. Even before I reached its magisterial gate, the ubiquitous and never-ending hum of the looms and spinning machines announced Zhenfu's location. Young women and men crowded the entrance, hurriedly dismounting from their bicycles to begin their morning shift. Just beyond

the entrance, above their heads, a huge red banner proclaimed: "I love Zhenfu and devote myself to the Four Modernizations."

This book addresses the cultural politics of modernity in the late twentieth century. It suggests how modernity is imagined, pursued, and experienced not in the Euro-American centers that have conventionally been designated as the preeminent origins of modernity but rather in those places marked by a deferred relationship to modernity. My argument goes against the grain of much recent anthropology of modernity: I propose that modernity persists as an imaginary and continuously shifting site of global/local claims, commitments, and knowledge, forged within uneven dialogues about the place of those who move in and out of categories of otherness. By opening out the imaginary space of modernity we pay attention to its gaps, fissures, and instabilities, those moments when "others" unsettle forms of domination enacted in the name of modernity.² This space is filled with culturally positioned projects formed within intersecting global imaginations.

To understand the passion with which modernity is pursued by people who have been made to live in a decentered relationship to Europe and the United States—and, in the case of China, also to Japan—we must recognize specific histories of colonialism and socialism, as well as the contours of late-twentieth-century global political and cultural economies. Ethnography captures these specificities. The significance placed on ethnographic specificity does not merely reflect a disciplinary conceit. It also makes possible a challenge to current theories both of modernity and of global capitalism.

What follows thus engages in ethnographic theorizing about the imaginary of modernity in China in the postsocialist era, as the country makes an uneven and highly contestatory transition to capitalism. From the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s, people in China witnessed a moment of vivid social transformation, in which both the future and the past were matters of explicit debate and sources of highly articulate hopes, desires, and frustrations. I highlight this social process from the perspective of those made into subalterns in China in relation to the pursuit of modernity. "Subaltern" here refers to a category of subjectivity

that represents the underside of power. I also recognize that those who identify with or participate in the discursive space constructed as subaltern do so through and not outside of relations of power.³ These people actively engage their subalternity by challenging and reinterpreting, even as they embrace and are shaped by, the post-Mao vision of modernity. In so doing they fracture, at times inadvertently, the apparently seamless “real” of modernity.

Arguments about femininity and masculinity, and their articulation with diverse social practices, have figured centrally in post-Mao modernity. Gender thus necessarily comes to the fore of my analysis: rather than being one factor to be considered in or added to discourses of modernity, it is formative of relations of power in visions of what constitutes modernity. By “gender,” I mean contingent, nonfoundational differentiations of femininity and masculinity that are mapped onto social relations and bodies, defining the nexus of power/knowledge that permeates social life. Gender categories are not unified or stable but subject to negotiation, conflict, and change. I thus treat gender as compelled through, rather than parallel with, other forms of difference, including class, race, and age—or, more precisely, the formation of cohorts based on successive political mobilizations.

In post-Mao China, three distinctive cohorts of women workers encountered one another as they each developed what Paul Gilroy (1993), after W. E. B. Du Bois, has called a “double consciousness” of being in but not of modernity. In disparate ways marked by history, these cohorts maneuvered to position themselves in relation to several overlapping processes in the post-Mao vision of modernity. They experienced disjunctures in their genealogies and memories about political convictions, as the contours of state power changed and China entered into networks of transnational capital. The overlapping meanings of “political convictions” are suggestive, because they point to a dynamic approach to modernity. All of these meanings—beliefs in politics and economics, the discursive production of believing subjects, and the sentencing and judgment people undergo for those beliefs—taken together, allude to ruptures within socialist and postsocialist versions of modernity.⁴ Accordingly, in this book I consider disjunctures that reveal what we might think of as allegories of modernity. I pursue the ways that the active

creation of cultural forms is possible even under states with well-developed mechanisms for social control.

Since at least the time of the Southern Song dynasty in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when it served as the imperial capital, Hangzhou has been a primary center of silk production. During the imperium, the elite reserved for themselves the privilege of wearing silk. Silk thus furnished a vital sign of Chinese culture or, more accurately, of imperial civilization. From the late nineteenth century on, silk pulled Hangzhou into a global cultural and political economy, as the material became one of China's major exports. Today, China exports 90 percent of the world's output of raw silk and 40 percent of its silk fabrics (China Daily, 25 March 1985). Zhenfu is one of Hangzhou's major export factories. Over twenty-five hundred workers labor there.

Zhenfu's Number 3 silk-weaving shop was kept dim so that weavers could discern mistakes in the fine mesh of the weave. Shades covered the tall windows of the cavernous room to block the glare of the sun. Only one bright bulb hung precariously over each of the several hundred looms. These iron jacquard looms were oddly beautiful, as the rows of bulbs threw off a shimmery light onto the thousands of translucent silk yarns in the warp. Their beauty was enhanced by the intricately patterned silk quilt covers emerging from within the looms; used throughout China in marriage dowries, these quilts featured their gay greens and reds of double phoenixes symbolizing a long life for the couple.

But the deafening cacophony of shuttles pounding furiously back and forth across these machines spoke loudly of production quotas, pulling the women and few men who worked in the shop to cleave to their assigned four looms—recently doubled from two—ever watchful for breaks in the delicate silk. Mistakes were the border between workers and machine, where the past of old looms and the present of workers jarred into strained efficiency, and the meaning of productivity became caught in the fissures of post-Mao economic reform. Most weavers hovered over their looms even during mealtimes, so they might meet their daily quotas. I followed Qiu Shifu, the assistant shift leader, as she painstakingly mended the tears in the warp or pulled out faulty weaving.

Amid the hard work, there were subtle refusals. The younger women weavers wandered briefly away from their looms to visit one another, while the young men, inveterate chain smokers, took regular cigarette breaks in the tiny office off the shop floor. One machine repairer liked to flirt with the young women

weavers, as did the floor sweeper, who tried to get them to go dancing in the evenings at the newly opened clubs.

Tourists regularly passed through a neighboring silk factory to gaze at the "process of silk making" ("here the cocoons are sorted, there the yarn is spun out of the cocoon, here the cloth is woven"), a reification of the production process mirrored in the commodity fetishism in the attached silk shop, where tourists hoped to buy Chinese authenticity at third world prices. Workers appeared to be there as adjuncts to help the process along and to supply a more "human" touch to the tourists' silk. Zhenfu, in contrast, was not a living museum of cultural artifacts.

In Zhenfu's weft preparation shop, Xiao Ma, the energetic young shift leader, led me on her brisk inspection rounds. In the prep shop, the noisy hum was less jarring but no less incessant. Row upon row of ring frames and spindles spun ceaselessly and twisted endlessly as women walked back and forth to check for broken silk yarns. Women-machines spun, combined, twisted, and rewound the weft thread in preparation for weaving. In the winter, a thick blanket covered the shop door to insulate the shop, which was slightly heated to keep the silk threads from suffering the biting winter chill. Just inside the door, a torn red poster with faint Cultural Revolution slogans hung neglected and ignored. Overshadowing it was a gigantic production board suspended on the back wall of the shop floor where Mao Zedong's larger-than-life portrait had once stood.

When Xiao Ma wasn't making her rounds, I sat at the table off the shop floor where some of the women, especially those who had entered the factory together during the Cultural Revolution, came to chat during overly long rests. Or I might make my way upstairs to help Xiao Bao, the assistant shift leader who had also come of age during the Cultural Revolution, while away the slow hours. At other times, I walked through the tall forest of machines and searched out the older women, who more discreetly suspended their work activities while remaining near their assigned positions. Still, the steady hum of the machines never ended. Even when Xiao Ma rang the lunch or dinner bell and the shop emptied out, the spools and ring frames continued to spin until the thread ran out. But by that time, the half hour for the meal was usually over.

My interest in the disjunctures of modernity arose during my two and a half years of fieldwork in the mid-1980s and early 1990s among women

workers in the silk industry of China's eastern coastal city of Hangzhou, in Zhejiang province. During those years, I found it almost impossible to generalize about the effects of China's latest modernization program on "women" as if they were a homogeneous group.⁵ Instead, I found that women who had come of age as workers during different political movements since the socialist revolution held a strong sense of identity as political generations, loosely marked by age, who self-consciously distinguished themselves from one another in terms of their identities as women and their relationships to labor, as well as in their interpretations of how gender and class relations inform China's future. To phrase it in poststructuralist terms, the various social projects trafficking under the sign of advancing modern socialism constituted anew the social categories of "women" and "workers"; thus, those who became subjects through these categories at different historical conjunctures did not necessarily identify with each other.

Indeed, the very idea of generational differences emerges in China simultaneously with the pursuit of modernity. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion that groups of people related horizontally to one another in terms of demarcated periods of linear history has accompanied a quite different cultural notion of vertical ties through kinship. That these groups can be attributed shared experiences and characteristics makes sense only when the modernist idea of progress—of always overcoming and surpassing that which came before—appears and takes hold.

The politics of memory serve as a critical site for creating these differences among women. They bring to the fore the conflicts between forgetting and remembering, as these are entangled in state projects. Post-Mao narratives of modernity explicitly decentered workers, who became icons of all that went wrong with Maoist socialism. Women workers, however, did not negotiate their increasing marginalization uniformly. Their dynamic memories of their shifting relationship to the state and to powerful rhetorics of socialism led to divergent struggles over the meaning of their changing experiences of subalternity. Their commentary and back talk, which tugged at their strongly held desires for China to be modern, led me to question the idea that modernity

endures as a unified project that produces a homogeneous form of subjectivity.

The ways that the two oldest cohorts—those who came of age in the first flush of revolutionary activity in the 1950s and those who formed their identity in the violent upheavals of the Cultural Revolution—remembered how they became self-conscious political subjects unsettled the process of naturalizing power in the name of a post-Mao modernity. The youngest cohort, fully formed within the post-Mao era, implicitly challenged the identities of the others, which had made labor and political authority such central sites for configuring gender. This younger generation both embraced the post-Mao imaginary, which naturalizes femininity and masculinity, and at times exceeded its official grasp.

The ruptures in China's successive imaginaries of modernity mark a desire, begun within a history of semicolonialism and repeatedly deferred, to position China as a nation-state that has fully arrived in the selfsame identity as former western colonizers. Indeed, the answer to why the project of modernity presents itself as so compelling in China, why it has been pursued so persistently, lies in the specter of China's exclusion, which serves to construct a Eurocentric universalist modernity. The strength of socialism in China derived, in part, from this history of semicolonialism and the search to make China a vigorous nation-state. This deferred desire lives on, now motivating postsocialist pursuits of wealth and power. It continues to exist in the global transformations resulting from transnational capital, even as so-called Asian capitalism takes center stage. A recurrent historical amnesia in the United States about China's semicolonial past obscures an acknowledgment of this dynamic. By contrast, in China one can hear its echoes not simply in official discourse, with its ongoing critique of the West, but in stories told by those who might in other regards be quite critical of the state.

The Liu family took me into their home at an early moment when my naïveté about political life in China was shattered, leading to a crisis about whom to trust and how to proceed. We were first introduced through Australian students who had come to study under the grandfather, a renowned acupuncturist. He and Liu Bomu, the grandmother, as well as their son and daughter-in-law,

accepted what seemed at the time potentially enormous risks to open their home to me whenever I needed succor, warmth, advice, or just a delicious meal. Our friendship was outside of anything related to my formal research project and thus avoided the complications of official concern, usually expressed through individual work units, about intimate interactions with foreigners. No one in the family held any love for the party. From the socialist revolution through the Cultural Revolution they had been targets of criticism and rectification, because of their elite family background and their class status as intellectuals. Now they alternately praised Deng Xiaoping's policy of reform, which involved courting intellectuals, and castigated "those uneducated, uncouth party cadres" for retarding China's progress.

Liu Bomu was a superb storyteller. I was an enthralled audience to her dramatic tales of her experiences as a doctor, or her painful stories of giving birth to thirteen children and losing seven, or her angry reminiscences about the Anti-Japanese War (World War II). One day I asked Liu Bomu to tell me her life's story. I thought it would be wonderful to record, I said. She immediately set her lips tight with disapproval. Her refusal was in the form of another story, though not the one I had asked for: she spoke of two men from America. They were wandering around the back alleys of Hangzhou with their cameras, peering into the most downtrodden, most poverty-stricken scenes in town. What were they going to do with these pictures? she asked rhetorically. I took her story as a warning about the politics of cross-cultural representations and the ways in which China has been made to serve as one of the central markers of those who have not quite reached modernity.

Precisely because they have been the objects of a world history that has enabled the West to distinguish itself as that history's principal subject, people in China and other non-western countries enact modernity in a form that must overcome this historical difference. Their exclusion from modernity can be discerned not merely in past orientalist texts but in current European philosophy (Derrida 1974; Kristeva 1974). I thus begin with an awareness that what gets called modernity in China is neither a purely localized matter nor a mere instantiation of a universal discourse. It exists instead, as I argue below, as a repeatedly deferred enactment marked by discrepant desires that continually replace one

another in an effort to achieve material and moral parity with the West. These deferrals reflect cross-cultural translations that Chinese elites and government leaders undertake as “China” continues to represent, for universalizing projects—and theories—of modernity, the formative “outside.” The differences, too, mark gaps in the domination of modernity, manifesting its instabilities and thereby providing room to challenge, exceed, and inflect its seeming transparency.

In this approach, I both join and challenge a recently emerging anthropology of modernity.⁶ This important and rich literature has developed from critiques of colonial anthropology and its teleological comparisons between the modern West and its nonmodern others. It rejects a still prevalent western mode of imaging that “explains” the inability of third world peoples to invent local futures by citing radical cultural difference. These anthropologists instead have turned a critical eye on the authority of collective projects undertaken in the name of modernity; their new scholarship sees modernity and its troubling effects proliferating everywhere.

What is now meant by this term? Critical theories of modernity highlight the articulation of epistemology, power, and subjectivity. They urge us to reexamine some of modernity’s most cherished ideals of freedom and equality. They also convey an implicit assumption that modernity constitutes a unified set of practices, in part because it takes place amid an implosive “global ecumene” (Hannerz 1989; Marcus 1992). Transnationalism thus appears to make modernity a way of experiencing the world as homogenous. As recently employed, the term modernity encompasses the invention of humanism, the secularization of society, and the emergence of technical reason. It is taken to mean a belief in the triumvirate of truth, reason, and progress, whose singular subject for grasping the world in these terms is Man—a subject free of located interests with a will and agency that originates from within himself. In short, it is identified with the European Enlightenment project. Modernity manifests itself in metanarratives such as neoliberalism—and also Marxism—whose emancipatory historiographies assume a telos of a utopia free of power. One finds its positivistic, instrumental, and universalizing morality materialized in bureaucratic mechanisms, capitalist

production, and mass media. Modernity further assumes a noncontinuous break with what it constructs as the irrationalities of tradition.

Much of this new anthropology of modernity has been inspired by the writings of Michel Foucault (1979, 1980).⁷ For Foucault, modernity ushers in a novel regime of disciplinarity. Far from offering a mode of greater individual freedom and progress, this regime signals an ever more thorough form of domination. Modern disciplinary power distinguishes itself by its political technologies of individuation, subject formation, and biopower. These subtle, nonspectacular technologies produce sovereign subjects who assume responsibility for "self-discipline" through the discursive practices of various institutions (e.g., penal, medical, industrial, educational, psychological), as well as the disciplines of the human sciences. At another register, biopower operates through governance of the social body, in regulating the population's physical and spiritual health, its life and growth. Disciplinary technologies both underlie and are furthered by the triumphs of capitalism. The centrality of the human sciences in disciplinarity reveals how knowledge and truth do not stand on the other side of power, opposed to it. Rather, modern power works its way through the construction of knowledge. Moreover, power exists not merely "out there" in macroinstitutions but in the very formation of bodies and desires, abrogating the distinction between subjectivity and institutions. Modern disciplinary power, then, operates most effectively when self-interested, individuated subjects believe they are most free, and thus it confounds the emancipatory premises of modernity. Put another way, actions we take in the name of individual freedom are figured by and within, rather than externally to, regimes of power.⁸

The anthropology of modernity written in this vein, while it successfully moves us beyond colonial forms of knowledge, inadvertently configures a new set of troubling assumptions. Most prominently, the modernity that emerges appears to be a unified discourse originating autochthonously from within Europe, which is then extracted from that history and given universal application.⁹ Spatially, such theories project an even global integration; temporally, they imply progress toward a stage of complete identity that, once achieved, retains a certain ontological stability.¹⁰ This anthropology presumes that the processes of

modernity elsewhere have been identical to those in the West, rather than viewing those processes as the effects of a complex cultural production forged within tangled relationships of (neo)colonialism and uneven transnationalism. Paradoxically, then, it reinvigorates a cultural geography of discrete holistic cultures within which modernity appears to develop immanently. If we are to succeed in challenging the dominations of modernity (including universalizing theories about it), we will need a quite different theory of culture, one that does not eviscerate the specificities of cultural practices emergent within histories of intersecting global imaginings.¹¹

Such a cultural theory would attend to discursive spaces created within the simultaneous emergence of "local" histories and "global" forms of power. It would notice the unequal relations of power and knowledge across regional, national, and transnational contexts and would highlight processes of contested meanings in specific locations. It would attend to how the moves to domination carried out under the sign of modernity are unstable. It would pay more heed to the porous boundaries that keep discourses of modernity from being a seamless whole. This theory would highlight the challenges wrought by the processes of "othering" that accompany the reiterative regulations (Butler 1993) of modernity and the modern production of subalterns and their submerged presence, which registers potential dissension. One can recognize that a powerful discourse on modernity has emanated from Europe and North America. Nevertheless, we must remain wary of creating unified, solipsistic readings out of local Euro-American practices or allowing those to overpower interpretations developed elsewhere.

Without losing the insights of Foucault, I wish to open up this theoretical critique by displacing some of the troubling assumptions that the anthropology of modernity has thus far produced. If one relocates modernity by viewing it from the perspective of those marginalized or excluded from the universalizing center, then it becomes a mutable project developed in unequal cross-cultural dialogues and contentions. Paul Gilroy (1993), for example, articulates this challenge when he argues that modernity has been generated within the antagonistic relationships of the imperial world, integral to which is "the fatal junction" of slavery, racial domination, and racialized reason. In contrast, then, to much of

the recent anthropology of modernity, I here emphasize two interrelated points: modernity's persistent history of normalizing colonial and now transnational relations of cultural difference, as well as the locatedness of the cultural imaginaries that engage modernity. This conjoined perspective renders more visible the active processes by which projects of power and knowledge crafted in the name of modernity are simultaneously naturalized and exposed as contingent, at once maintained and altered. These endeavors both encompass and abandon the subalterns they create, leaving them to maneuver along the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. If modernity is that imagined nexus linking a series of projects of science and management, then one must trace the translation process of these projects as they travel through history and across the East-West divide.

Modernity enfold and explodes by means of global capitalist forms of domination in conjunction with state techniques for normalizing its citizens. Along with these specific practices, modernity exists as a narrated imaginary: it is a story people tell themselves about themselves in relation to others. Modernity persists as a powerful narrative because nation-states organize the body politic around it (Dirks 1990). As a story, it can illuminate matters and shape subjectivities—but it can also fool and mislead us. Even in those moments when nation-states declare themselves most faithful to an assumed universal modernity, specific histories turn it into another form. For like all tales, its meaning acquires different valences with its various narrations. Modernity as a goal generates consequential struggles because people living in heterogeneous circumstances have been pulled into a “worlding” (Said 1983) of the term. Dreams, rhetorics, and power ricochet off its local/global dynamics. Modernity exists, then, alternately as discursive practice, allegory, trope.¹² One critical terrain for such stories is offered by culture, and tales of how it smoothes the way for modernity or blocks its potential are themselves modernist tropes. Culture thus appears as a substantive agent in the world. But there is another way to think of the cultural: not so much as substance but as process, always emergent, always relational, permeated with power, existing through subtle and overt contests over meanings both practical and imaginary, shaping the desires that infuse modernity.

Therefore, my analysis in this book centers on stories—narratives that contribute to the construction of social life. At first I took people's stories for granted, treating them as transparent descriptions. In doing so, however, I immediately faced the unsatisfying ethnographic generalization that in the moments of telling their life stories, Chinese people could, at times, sound oddly querulous, emphasizing failure or lack. Such assumptions of cultural difference only serve to reinforce rather than subvert the colonial project.¹³ Moreover, these complaints jostled with apparently contradictory stories—shared by the same people at different times—that signaled pleasure or a nicely sardonic sense of humor. Only gradually, through critiques of ethnographic writing, increased attention to narrative within anthropology, and my own growing understanding of the relationship between politics and speech acts, did I begin to see people's narratives as one of the means through which modern socialist subjects had been constituted in China. Listening to and analyzing these stories, paying attention to both the form and content, to rhetoric, mode, context, and tone, allowed me to appreciate the differing political and cultural contentions that competing projects fostered in the name of modernity. Such attention also pushed me to reenvision culture as such, for these stories spoke of the cultural poetics of political desire. They made culture into a provisional space for imagining one's location in the world; a culture became a space full of stops and starts, contradictions and claims—and always infused with power.

As a result of communist organizing in China, telling one's life story turned into a self-conscious political act with concrete, material ramifications. A particular form the party fostered, known as "speaking bitterness," framed stories at the moment of liberation but also, as I argue here, continued in informal mode up through economic reform.¹⁴ Narratives, then, evince the culturally specific means by which people represent and therefore experience the worlds in which they live. Yet narratives also provide the moments of challenging those world orders. As Kathleen Stewart (1996) argues, narration opens up gaps in the order of things and the meanings of signs. My emphasis is not on the poetics of narrative but on the manifold ways that power works through narratives that bind together the practical and the imaginary.

Modernity, then, is conveyed in inconstant projects of governmental-

ity, education, and scientific management: restless, discontinuous cultural interactions that create impure, syncretic subjects.¹⁵ Its core entails the transverse dynamics of cultural differentiation and multiply positioned subjects. The multiplicities of what counts as modernity exist in the unforeseen outcomes of domination, the diverse cultural struggles to deploy its power, and the couplings of intersecting histories that re-route it.¹⁶ These processes forestall ideological closure on modernity. This, I believe, is what Homi Bhabha (1994a) means when he speaks of the "belatedness" of modernity. Bhabha highlights the deeply contradictory processes by which those oppressed by colonialism carry, in its aftermath, the sign of a "time-lag" of cultural difference. As subordinated people strive for modernity, which promises to overcome their belatedness, they create disjunctures in the "present" of modernity. Modernity is thus fissured with paradox and incompleteness, not simply because all categories implode on their own unstable differences but because of distinctive social histories within a global imperialism.

What is called for here is not another universal theory of modernity but specific cultural histories that make for necessarily "other" modernities. On this account, even Bhabha's concept of belatedness could be historicized. A brief and admittedly overly schematic set of comparisons might prove useful.¹⁷ Through its colonial experience, "South Asia" came to represent the ancient wisdom available to Europe. Its position is always already that which comes before Europe, anOther Greece. The notion of belatedness helps explain the history of these depictions. "Africa," in contrast, represents to Europeans and Americans not ancient wisdom but the "natural" within human behavior that needs to be civilized to create modern subjectivity. Africa is the site of the magical fetish that can be tapped to stimulate the modern economy or the modern psyche. It is the spark of sexual and material desire that enlivens modernity even as it is controlled by it.¹⁸ Belatedness is less useful here than perhaps a concept of reification, implosion, or grooming, where grooming is a site of civilizing the body's actions and appearance. China offers yet another position of otherness, representing less the repository of Europe's ancient wisdom or the heart of Europe's darkness than the constitutive "outside" of western civilization. China shapes modernity

by representing to Europe everything modernity is not, rather than supplying the raw material of the past or the nature from which modernity is formed. Given this history, projects in China to reach modernity might best be thought of in the theoretical terms of mediation, (im)purification, and lack.

Perhaps a set of contrasting examples would be useful to illuminate the argument about modernity presented here. Bruno Latour, in his recent polemic about the social study of science (1993), has forcefully argued that the sign of modernity under which “we” have lived is an imaginary one, insofar as it manages only partially to frame our existence. For Latour, modernity rests not so much on the birth of humanism as on a fundamental division that separates knowledge of the nonhuman realm, or nature, from the human realm of society, culture, and language. This “purification” of realms—what “we” usually take to mean modernity—in turn obscures the “translations” or mediations that actually occur among nature, power, and culture.¹⁹ Indeed, modern political critiques are founded on the ability to separate out what belongs to science or things-in-themselves or “reality” and what belongs to the functioning of language or symbols or the unconscious.²⁰ Only so long as we imagine that these sets of practices do not coexist—even as the proliferation of hybrids relies on the pretense of purified realms—can we continue to act as if we were modern. “By playing three times in a row on the same alternation between transcendence and immanence, the moderns can mobilize Nature, objectify the social, and feel the spiritual presence of God, even while firmly maintaining that Nature escapes us, that Society is our own work, and that God no longer intervenes” (Latour 1993:34).²¹ Latour concludes that we have never been modern in the sense of living according to the pure separation of realms. Modernity is rather an imaginary order that we are now able to discern because it has exhausted itself.

Although Latour insightfully renders the paradoxes of the modern imaginary, his assumption of an unmarked “we” as the coherent subject of modernity, coupled with an embarrassing anthropological distinction between premodern and modern peoples, must be set aside.²² Much postcolonial writing has been dedicated to troubling just such forms of