LET ME CONFESS MY BIASES at the start: In my view, modernity is not a trope, theory, project, or destination, or if it sometimes seems to be all these things, it is never these things alone. It is instead a condition, historically produced over three centuries around the globe in processes of change that have not ended yet.1 Modernity is not optional in history, in that societies could not simply “choose” another regime of historicity for themselves, for such is the tyranny of modern times.2 Nor is modernity dispensable in history-writing, especially for those who work on the recent past in what some still call “the rest of the world,” which many now would emend to “the world,” period. While not unitary or universal, the modern possesses commonalities across time and space, however differently it is experienced in different places. These commonalities are substantial enough to render impossible any truly “alternative” modernities, as attractive as such an idea may be to critics of Eurocentric models masquerading as universal norms, of whom I am one. The notion of “multiple modernities,” too, only helps to shift our attention away from singularity to the plural inflections of the modern experience, which is importantly diverse but not endlessly multiple: it is sad but true that not every country gets the modernity it wants or deserves.3

The common “grammar of modernity” encompasses such elements as the nation-state, whose numbers have proliferated from fifty at the beginning of the twentieth century to nearly two hundred today, and which appears not likely soon to dissolve, globalization notwithstanding.4 Other institutional commonalities include social shifts in massified urban and disrupted communal life and the insistence, if some-

1 In this regard, the postmodern is but the latest critique of modernity, a critique, moreover, with little purchase in the developing world.
2 “Regime of historicity” refers to the distinctive modern view of the temporal relation between past, present, and future. I take the term (but not his interpretation) from François Hartog, Régimes d’historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps (Paris, 2003); see also Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, and Patrick García, Historicités (Paris, 2009).
3 E.g., Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ed., Multiple Modernities (New Brunswick, N.J., 2002); Dominic Sachsenmaier and Jens Riedel, with Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, eds., Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese and Other Interpretations (Leiden, 2002); Charles Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries (Durham, N.C., 2004); Ibrahim Kaya, Social Theory and Later Modernities: The Turkish Experience (Liverpool, 2004).
times callowly rhetorical, on national political participation. Also global is the sub-
jection to the forces of capitalism and industrialization as well as incorporation into
the reigning geopolitical world order, from which there appears to be no haven or
exit but which also may provide positive inventories such as international human
rights. Challenges to individual identity and subjectivity play out against shifting
horizons of cultural value and critique that highlight the common contradictions of
the “oxymodern.”5 “Development” and “emancipation” are among the most fre-
cquently evoked “promissory notes” of modernity, although their content varies with
the people advocating or opposing them.6 It seems clear that characteristics in earlier
checklists—rationality, secularization, democracy—do not necessarily characterize
the modern world as we are living it. Nor any longer does the teleology of progress,
whether linear or dialectical, toward a modernity that will one day “arrive” or
“emerge” and irreversibly alter the status of a people. Social, economic, and political
unevenness persists within and across societies; new inequalities are created; de-
industrialization occurs. “Convergence” is, happily, a phantom, but when the “global
stairway” to development becomes a “wall” excluding societies that have fallen off
its tread, the result, in James Ferguson’s example, can be to change Africa from a
continent into a “category of abjection.”7

Yet our sensitivity to the flaws of the one-size-fits-all Western-based conceit of
modernity should not obscure the appeal of the modern to the peoples around the
world who co-produced it. For modernity, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam has written, is
“historically a global and conjunctural phenomenon—not a virus that spreads from
one place to another.”8 Imperialism made the process largely coercive in many
places, while Japan undertook a defensive modernization to preserve its sovereignty
in the nineteenth-century international order dominated by the West. But some as-
psects of global and conjunctural modernity possessed—and continue to possess—
magnetic attraction for reformers and revolutionaries, workers and peasants, elites
and ordinary people who reached for modern ways of living and being. To denigrate
this aspirational modernity or condescend to contemporary desires for development
would be to reproduce, from the opposite vantage point and with all goodwill, the
Eurocentric arrogance that once kept the “backward” peoples of “elsewhere” for-
ever in the “imaginary waiting room” of history while the West commanded the halls
of the modern.9 For better or worse, the long modern conjuncture, with its welter
of contingencies and consequences, means that elsewhere is everywhere now.

5 This is Bruce Knauff’s word for the experienced tension between global and local—new and old—
practices and beliefs in “vernacular modernities” around the globe, but one that equally well charac-
terizes the processes of becoming “oxymodern” in the West. Bruce M. Knauff, ed., Critically Modern:
6 For “promissory notes,” see Björn Wittrock, “Modernity: One, None, or Many? European Origins
and Modernity as a Global Condition,” in Eisenstadt, Multiple Modernities, 36–38.
7 James Ferguson, Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian
Copperbelt (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 236–245.
8 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400–1750,”
Daedalus 127, no. 3 (September 1998): 99–100.
9 Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference
FOR HISTORIANS WHO AGREE that modernity is not a “disposable fiction” but the historical process and representation of our global times, the question becomes how to write about it.10 Here I admit another bias: since histories and theories of modernity are ineluctably linked, I believe that historians have both an empirical and a theoretical task before them. We know that all theories have histories hidden inside them, not least because most arose to explain a particular historical development. Think of Marx analyzing nineteenth-century industrialization in England, or Weber accounting for the disenchanted world of the modern German state. They and others sought to explain and also to criticize the modernity they saw around them, defining not only what the modern was in the present but what it ought to be in the future. And so these theories of modernity carried particular historical experiences concealed in the folds of their self-wrapped cloaks of universality.

If theories of modernity carry their histories with them, it is also true that the histories of modern societies have theories built into their core. In the decades around 1900, for example, nationalist reformers in China, Japan, and other places regarded the unified nation-state as the universal—not merely European—political form of modernity, and for that reason considered it desirable, even necessary. For it was modernity that stood at the center of what they saw as the “global imaginary” of the day.11 In response to their conjunctural moment, they assumed that modernity demanded a world of nations (and their empires) and sought both existing Western models and also the theories that explained or underlay them. From the importance of Prussian ideas of statecraft for Japan and the widespread influence of Social Darwinism in the late nineteenth century to the global impact of Marxist views of history in the twentieth century, theories understood not just as Western but as universal marched in time with the varying versions of modern society produced across the continents.

Times—or “new times,” as moderns once self-assertively labeled their age—have changed.12 Of course, “modern” is a temporally slippery concept, connoting a chronological period that began several centuries ago as well as the sense of ever-changing up-to-dateness of the contemporary era. And modernity is as much an attitude as it is an institutional or cultural condition, a mental temper distinguished by perpetual self-consciousness and critique. As a result, theories of modernity have piled up over time, bringing a profusion of pasts into a multiplicity of presents. Yet while social theorists continue to add adjectives—reflexive modernity, liquid modernity, late modernity—to account for what has happened in the modern West, a wealth of histories of modernity in different societies around the world now offer an opportunity to explain their experience much as Marx and others sought to explain Europe so very long ago, or as modernization theorists tried to show how the “underde-
veloped” world could one day come to look like the United States in the postwar, Cold War years. Just as Europe once served as the *explanandum* that generated theories of modernity, the worldful of modern experiences can do the same today. Instead of applying the pile-up of past theories to explain such experiences, we have the opportunity to use such experiences to explain modernity. We can, in short, generate new theories from these histories. Of course, the theories will also have particular histories built into them, but they will be those of Japan, India, Brazil, China, and Turkey, as well as of non-nation-based phenomena we too often overlook.

And any theories—conceptions, definitions, interpretations—that twenty-first-century historians come up with would potentially be relevant not only to what were once called “extra-European” societies but to the globe at large. It is in this spirit that I am now trying to explore Japanese history in the Meiji period (1868–1912) as empirical grounds for thinking more generally about the processes of becoming modern. I recognize that not every society was quite as obsessed with “modernity” as was Japan, although the histories and historiographies of most of Asia, much of the postcolonial world, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East—not to mention Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union, and other places—repeatedly examined the nature of their modernity and how and why it might differ from that of others. Still, my explorations bear the imprint of the empirical specificity of Japan’s modernizing experience, which in turn refracts the possibilities of the global conjuncture of the late nineteenth century. Here are some preliminary thoughts.

**Meiji Japanese** were fond of describing their era as if everything about it were new: as if they had “lived two lives” in one in the sudden transition from “feudalism” to “civilization” after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and then continued to experience “unprecedented” change during their lifetimes. Despite this story of an all-new, all-at-once march toward “civilization,” modernity did not happen that way, not in Meiji Japan or anywhere else. The first tenet of explanation must therefore address the “beforeness” of change, which is to say, the *preexisting conditions* in a society at the time that modernity allegedly “began.” It is not a matter of preparation; nor are preexisting conditions determining or causal in themselves. It is rather the

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15 These dates, which mark the Meiji Restoration and the Meiji emperor’s death, do not encompass the larger processes in question, which began at least as early as the 1850s and continued at least through the 1910s.


18 This has nothing to do with “preparation” for the modern. Indeed, I regard the term “early modern Japan” as a rhetorical fallacy that imputes a teleological arc to the Tokugawa period (1600–1868) as if it were “paving the way” for Meiji, as modernization theorists once asserted. For similar reasons I avoid
particular historical formations at the time of allegedly rapid change that set the conditions of the possible in Meiji Japan. And it is the interaction between those formations and the surge of change that explains the transformations that occurred, and also those that did not. These preexisting conditions are thoroughly historical in nature, not a matter of culture or “tradition” or any such timeless chimera. It is precisely their timeliness—their specific character at the conjunctural moment of the 1850s and 1860s—that affected the direction of events, which in turn influenced the events that came after them. To take the example of the centralization of the state, considered a core modern imperative at the time but by no means a foregone conclusion, the preexisting conditions included such things as the broadened intellectual horizons and social networks of samurai and commoner elites within a still legally closed-off country.19 The crisis occasioned by the arrival of American gunboats in 1853 provided an opportunity for younger members of these elites to act on their sense of the urgent need for action, in effect bypassing rules of seniority and status to gain access to power. These relative “outsiders” impelled many of the changes that occurred in the Restoration years, but the system accommodated those changes without massive revolutionary turmoil in part because these figures, however young and however broadened their horizons, belonged (more or less) to the elite orders of late Tokugawa society.

Of the preexisting political conditions, the combination, by the 1850s, of institutional enervation at the shogunal center and centrifugal energies in the feudal domains proved crucial in tipping the contingent possibilities toward a centralized state. It would have been more difficult to make even such a decidedly unradical revolution as the Meiji Restoration if the ancien régime had been as embedded in Japan as it was in France in 1789. The weakness of the shogunal system, in contrast, provided a relatively soft target that made its demise as much a “fall” as an “overthrow,” despite the outbreaks of violence surrounding it. At the same time, the preexisting centrifugal forces help to explain why centralization of the state took precedence amid the wholesale reforms enacted after the Restoration. Indeed, perhaps only preexisting conditions can explain why the feudal lords agreed, without significant opposition, to turn over their ancestral lands to the central government in 1869, effectively abolishing the feudal system. The emoluments they received in exchange scarcely matched the status and wealth that the most powerful domains lost with this surprising collective deed. It seems likely that the lords succumbed to persuasion or—more precisely—peer pressure in viewing a centralized government, composed of their number (or so they thought), as the way to resolve the nation’s weakness in the face of external threat.

As important as preexisting conditions are the versions of modernity available to a society at any given time. This is not a matter of early or late modernizers, but rather of the differences between the late-nineteenth-century world, in Japan’s case, the label “premodern,” which seems to co-opt a long and complex past for the one-track story of modernity.

19 E.g., Miyachi Masato, Bakumatsu ishinki no bunka to jōhō (Tokyo, 1994).
and the 1960s, for a number of newly independent African states—or again the 1990s, for the new nations created in the former Soviet Union. Colonial modernities, too, co-produced as they were by metropole and colony, worked with the modern ideas and practices on hand at the time of their formation, and in so doing changed them.

In synchronic terms, the available modernities in the last three decades of the nineteenth century were known to Japanese as “civilization,” understood both as a universal stage in world history and as a description of contemporary “Euro-America.” Although the Japanese definition made explicit the divide between East and West, the temporal commonalities of the global conjuncture were by no means confined to such “new nations” as Japan, Germany, and Italy. “Old” nations, including France, were undergoing similar changes in line with nineteenth-century ideas of the nation-state. Transforming “peasants into Frenchmen” between 1870 and 1914 required ideological and institutional efforts similar to those undertaken in Meiji Japan during the same period. The travails of creating a standard national language that beset Japan (and Denmark and other countries) were also arduous in France, where as late as 1880 only one-fifth of the population felt comfortable speaking the French language. The modern discipline of (national) history was established in England, France, the United States, and Japan at roughly the same time—in Japan and the United States in the late 1880s. Such were the synchronicities of the nineteenth-century nation-form, seemingly bent on the nationalization of everything, from time and space to identity and empire. Thus Meiji Japan and, by extension, other modern societies cannot be understood “vertically,” with reference solely to their own pasts. Between the aspiring, desiring reach for the modern and the exigent response to the demands of the international order, the nation-state seemed to many the only valid choice, a perception that itself constituted a mark of synchronic modernity.

The spectrum of available modernities exerts a diachronic effect as well. Most directly, the time of modernizing change has posterior consequences in the path dependence of institutions and ideas. The conjunctural moment when universities were established, civil codes drafted, and constitutions promulgated enabled and constrained subsequent developments. The role of the emperor in the Meiji Constitution of 1889, for example, combined up-to-date nineteenth-century notions of constitutional monarchy with the legendary imperial line “unbroken for ages eternal.” The European models of monarchy provided the modern legal framework to which the mythical “national polity” could be attached—with serious political consequences for imperial Japan as the role of the emperor became ever more mystical than monarchical, yet remained within its constitutional scaffolding. These aftereffects reached as far as the postwar “symbol emperor system” in the 1947 constitution, continuing the mythic imperial line to the present day.

Other diachronic consequences arise as actually existing modernities shift over time, providing new available modernities. Such changes provide one key to the differences in the character of Japanese imperialist rule, which began in Taiwan in

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1895, Korea in 1910, the Pacific Islands in 1914, and Manchuria in 1932. Aggressive modernizing in the empire continued in the 1930s even as the nationalist discourse of “overcoming modernity” surged at home, a discourse that in fact derived part of its anti-Western animus from contemporary European “world-historical” thinking. Of course, to label such changes diachronic is just another way of saying that history matters. Still, as a heuristic device, paying heed to the perceived modernities available at different moments underlines the commonalities that run through the global variants of the modern even as path dependence highlights the historical differences.

WHO WERE THE PROTAGONISTS OF MODERNITY in Meiji Japan? A common grammar of the modern means little if that grammar is not embodied in particular historical sentences, all of which possess a subject and a verb. In the canonical Meiji version, as it was enunciated at the time, the theme of the historical narrative was the making of the nation, which in its centrality resembled the place of revolution in modern French history and liberty in the “national romance” of the American narrative. In the Japanese story, the main protagonist of modernizing change was the state, which took—and was often given—credit for the reforms that created a centralized polity, a conscript army, a national tax base, a system of compulsory education, and a host of other measures taken toward the goal of creating, in the phrase of the day, a “wealthy nation and strong military.” In fact, the early Meiji state did far less than it claimed to have done, not least because it had neither the power nor the resources to implement the surge of paper reforms it promulgated in the late 1860s and early 1870s.

The Fundamental Code of Education of 1872 is a case in point. In it the government famously announced that the Ministry of Education “will soon establish an educational system . . . so that in the future, there shall be no village with an uneducated family or a family with an uneducated person.” This happy thought was one of those promissory notes of modernity. But the central government would not—indeed, could not—pay for the primary schools that formed the backbone of national compulsory education. The government may have legislated a national school system, but it was the local elites who built the schools and paid the teachers, and it was the families who laid out the tuition for their children. Provincial “men of influence” acted out of local pride and national sentiment, private interest and public-spiritedness, noting their desire to participate in the “cosmic upheaval” that followed the “great renovation” of 1868 and advance themselves and their communities at the same time. The families paid up because they believed in the practical value of learning and because of social expectations. They resisted the new system for their own reasons, too, protesting salaries, sometimes destroying school buildings, and declining to send their children to school rather than to work in the fields. In short, the

people helped to modernize (and nationalize) themselves, but they did so not always consciously and almost always in pursuit of their own interests.

To generalize from this and other examples, these seem to me the workings of what I call a “not-so-strong state.” For many years the Meiji state, in my view, was not as powerful as it claimed to be, or as historians tend to assume that it was. The limited resources of the national treasury during the early Meiji decades meant that it was primarily provincial funds that supported police, prisons, public health, poor relief, encouragement of industry, and public works. One might say that the Meiji state did not need to be so strong, as if governmentality were socially generated and socially imposed, not only by the institutions but also by the people who helped to create them, with social pressure playing an important role. Granted that my hypothesis of a not-so-strong early Meiji state will be vociferously contested, I suggest nonetheless that an examination of the actual processes of modernizing change reveals a more diverse cast of protagonists than appears in either the self-proclaimed or the conventionally identified accounts of Japanese history. Nor does the notion of a not-so-strong state deny the importance of the state: there are ways in which the not-so-strong state worked more effectively to unify, and control, the nation in its own image than a more dictatorial government might have done.

**THE PROCESS OF BECOMING MODERN** is almost always a matter of trial and error, with constant improvisation for different purposes and cross-purposes. The so-called path to modernity runs anything but straight; at best, it is a zigzag, and then not necessarily in any single general direction. These zigs and zags of [*improvisational modernity*](#) are the subject of my current work on the “tectonics of social change,” which compares the long Meiji Restoration—from the 1850s through the 1880s—to a historical earthquake. The operations of capitalism, technologies of national power, upheavals of social order—all the institutional changes associated with the first half of the Meiji period precipitated processes of dislocation and relocation. These dislocations of modernity—for that is what they were—played out across the decades as people maneuvered and manipulated, managed and failed to manage in their efforts to regain lost equilibria; indeed, some never did. Consider the fate of the protagonist of *Before the Dawn*, a novel based on the experience of the author’s father, a local “man of influence” whose hopes for the Restoration had been so high and whose subsequent disillusion with the outcome so great that he ended his life insane and out of touch with the times. Or rather, when he died in 1886, he was living in a different (older) temporality from the national time decreed by the demands of the slogan “civilization and enlightenment.” It took decades for people in every social place—high, low, and in between—to make their way through the sometimes massive transfiguration of historical terrain.

Ashio, known as Japan’s first “modern” pollution incident, exemplifies the im-

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24 See also Kaviraj, “Modernity and Modernization,” 521–522.

25 “The Social Meanings of Meiji” is my effort to move from history to theory on the basis of the Japanese experience of what was known first as “civilization” (*bunmei*) and from the early 1900s as “modernity” (*kindai*).

provisional processes of accommodation to the seismic dislocations of the early Meiji years. During the 1880s, the tailings from the booming Ashio copper mine despoiled the land, killed the fish, and made the rivers run white. But what made the Ashio incident “modern” was neither the barren earth nor the heartless mine owner, for these were old stories for copper mines—or even the new extremes of damage caused by advanced industrial technology and aggressive capitalist production. Instead, it was the cumulative changes in context—the institutional tremors—which included everything from land tenure, taxation, local government, and wage labor to rising capitalism, the importance of export copper, the new constitution and legal codes, a new imperial bureaucracy, a strengthening national press, and so on. These historical shakeups rendered the established mechanisms of protest ineffective and also demanded, and enabled, new practices of social and political action.

For years, beginning in the 1890s, all the parties involved tried every means they could to get the results they wanted. They mixed the old with the new, changing tack and tactics as they employed the entire repertory of actions available to them. The peasant protesters, the mining company, the mineworkers, and the government all followed trial-and-error courses of their own. Essentially, nothing worked quite as expected, in part because the old measures were insufficient to the new order. Villagers could still petition for redress, for example, but the village common lands, which had once been used to compensate victims of mine pollution, had all but disappeared with the Meiji land reforms, and who in the new system was to dispense such communal justice in any case? Nor, and equally important, had the new Meiji measures yet established themselves in effective procedural practice. Reducing the land tax as a way to compensate localities, for instance, may have echoed earlier practices of tax relief, but now not only offered nothing to afflicted tenant farmers but also deprived the affected villages of their tax base. Institutional mechanisms, whether of grievance and redress, of social policy and bureaucratic responsibility, were out of sync with one another, dislocated by the tectonic shifts in the Meiji terrain of power.

The Ashio story suggests that institutional change may have set—or unsettled—the stage, but that it was multiple protagonists who improvised their contested way to what eventually stabilized as modern practices of protest and response. Similarly, the Meiji Civil Code, promulgated in 1898 after thirty years of drafting and redrafting, stood only at the midpoint of the emergence of what came to be known as the “modern Japanese family,” which evolved into a social formation quite different in shape from its juridically imagined version. The same can be said of the sometimes anguishingly reflexive subjectivity associated with what Japanese intellectuals by

27 Andô Seiichi, Kinsei kōgaishi no kenkyū (Tokyo, 1992).
29 While practices of protest had stabilized by the 1920s, the final court settlement in the Ashio case was not reached until 1974, one year after the mine ceased operation.
1910 were calling the modern self. Improvisation implies that the shape of the Meiji modern was neither certain nor predetermined, although once a road was taken, it affected the course open to later actors. Examining the zigs and zags of improvisational modernity—in particular, the ways in which a society improvises—can show not only how but why its modern history turned out the way it did.

What can one say of the modern experiences produced by such improvisational processes, since modernity, while held in common, is not everywhere the same? At the moment I am drawn to a metaphor I call blended modernities. To begin with the historical example—cremation in modern Japan—how did it happen that Japanese, who in the previous era had mostly buried their dead, ended up in modern times nearly always burning them? This, too, is a trial-and-error story. In the 1870s, Shinto nativists supported burial as the Japanese way of death against the “foreign” practices of Buddhism. In an anti-Buddhist move in 1873, the government banned cremation as inhumane and hazardous to health. Some said that cremation was a barbaric Buddhist ritual; others insisted that it was the most up-to-date Western practice. Two years later, the government lifted the ban, washing its hands of the debate with the statement “One must consider the feelings and thoughts of foolish men and women and leave it to their choice. This is not a problem for governance.”

The Ministry of Finance had already sided with the proponents of cremation because graveyards impeded road construction, not to mention—that the ministry did mention it—the loss of taxable land and revenue. Over time, the hygiene factor became increasingly prominent, as public health assumed the status of a tenet of social common sense. But now the health of the public was linked to technologically sophisticated, sanitary, and “civilized” crematoria, which the government undertook to regulate. In an effort to preserve their institutional relevance and, as important, their hold on the funeral business, Buddhists continually adapted their position until they, too, were stressing hygiene more than ritual. In the early 1880s, cremation supporters expressed civilizational pride in the fact that German and British experts asked to consult the plans for Japan’s advanced modern crematoria. And by the mid-twentieth century, nearly all Japanese were cremated and nearly every funeral was Buddhist.

This outcome was neither new nor old, neither Buddhist nor Western. Nor was it a product of state policy or a move toward secularization. And it was not a hybrid, in the sense of combining existing practices, or a synthesis in a Hegelian sense, either. The outcome—the modern Japanese way of death—was in fact something different and something new. It was, I suggest, the historical analogy of what some cognitive scientists call a “conceptual blend”: by projecting aspects of two different components onto a separate mental space, the mind creates a new idea, a blend with an “emergent structure” that possesses characteristics present in neither of the two

31 See the later works of the great novelist Natsume Sōseki, e.g., Kokoro: A Novel and Selected Essays, trans. Edwin McClellan (Lanham, Md., 1992).
32 The summary of the cremation debates is from Andrew Bernstein, Modern Passings: Death Rites, Politics, and Social Change in Imperial Japan (Honolulu, 2006), 67–90.
33 Ibid., 84.
34 The first British crematorium was built in 1885.
original components.35 We might think of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernities as “historical blends.” In this case, preexisting conditions, for example, earlier funerary practices (which included cremation, but not as a dominant practice), were juxtaposed with the available modernity of cremation, although it, too, was by no means a signature of nineteenth-century “civilization,” as the British example makes clear. In short, the creativity of the blend began with the particular choice of components, neither of which was either obvious or preconceived. The resulting blend was indeed something new—“emergent”—with aspects that existed neither in Japan of earlier times nor in the “civilized” practices of cremation that Meiji Japanese invented as much as borrowed. The fact that the blend turned out as it did, with cremation dominant and Buddhists conducting funerals, but both in a way different from their original character, had everything to do with improvisation and historical process. Modern Japanese burial practices were therefore new, an instance of blended modernity.36

The globe is now full of blended modernities, whether in Japan, Korea, Nigeria, or Iran. Yet according to the metaphor of historical blending, no version of the modern is merely imitative of or inferior to another one, because by definition each inflection of modernity emerged as a new blend in a separate (metaphorical) space. Granted, “blending” is an imperfect metaphor, which risks misunderstanding as a homogeneous mix, which it emphatically and analogically is not, and which offers yet another term for the hybridity, plurality, and multiplicity of modern experience.37 We have almost, it sometimes seems, run out of words. But at least the metaphor liberates the globeful of modern histories from confining comparisons with an always already modern Europe. And since no society is exempt from the processes of historical blending, Britain, France, and the United States changed—and continue to change—in precisely the same way. History, in short, offers no abstract model of the modern, only embedded real modernities produced by creative blending that never reaches an end. At some point, of course, the emergent product of such processes will no longer be called modernity, but for the moment that is where we are. The notion of historical blending may help to account both for the commonalities of our modern times and also—because the blends are different—for the fact that there remain few, if any, universals of an absolute sort.

Specificities are the heart and soul of historical writing. Confronting a “mass of empirical observations which constantly threatened to escape the frameworks of analysis” seems to me a perfect description of what history is good for: to push outward from specific modern pasts toward generalizations about the way modernity

35 For the source of this analogy, see Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities (New York, 2002).
36 For other examples of “blended modernity,” see Carol Gluck, “Telling the Twentieth Century,” in Gluck, Thinking with the Past. Modern Japan and History (Berkeley, Calif., forthcoming, 2012).
37 E.g., Nestor Garcia Canclini, Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity (Minneapolis, 1995); Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., Alternative Modernities (Durham, N.C., 2001). The references throughout these roundtable essays show the range of excellent work in this field.
works—to create, in effect, new frameworks of analysis. To put it another way, historians, too, can climb the ladder of abstraction from their empirical base toward theoretical hypotheses. These hypotheses, in turn, can travel to be tested and modified in other settings by other scholars. We historians, I often think, tend to stop too soon, when we might continue our interpretive work until it reaches for more general conceptions. Now is our chance to dig deeply into modern histories in every global corner, to create new narratives that do justice to the particularities (and injustices) of modern experience, and to explain and conceive modernity in genuinely global terms.

And finally, since its emergence in the nineteenth century, modern history-writing (like modern theories of modernity) has always depicted the past with the future in mind, assuming—often without saying so—that critical history could affect the arc of the arrow of time. It is no accident that the latest surge of thinking about modernity appeared during the 1990s in a world that demanded new horizons of imagination and action. In this sense, a fresh study of the modern past is also a means to imagine the way to a better future, not only our own but that of a globe that is now beyond the end of elsewhere.

39 Perhaps it is because social scientists are expected to reach for generalities that they have produced concepts such as “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson) and “weapons of the weak” (James Scott) on the basis of what is in large part historical research.

Carol Gluck is the George Sansom Professor of History at Columbia University, where she teaches modern Japanese history and twentieth-century international history. Her most recent book is Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon, edited with Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Duke University Press, 2009); her Past Obsessions: World War II in History and Memory will be published next year.