

*Vasant
Kaiwar and
Sucheta
Mazumdar,
editors*

of Modernity

Essays on Race, Orient, Nation

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Acknowledgments

The origins of this volume go back to two debates that have especially engaged us in the last decade: the crisis of area studies and the crisis of ethnic studies. By the 1990s, both fields, born almost in tandem but coming of age in very separate spheres, were being challenged to confront the cultural and political manifestations of global capitalism by their internal membership as well as by those working outside the self-defined perimeters of these sites of scholarly investigation. This book is the product of the dialogue between the two fields that we have been privileged to be part of. In addition to comments by colleagues on our individual essays that we have acknowledged below, here we wish to thank various conference and workshop organizers who have provided us with opportunities over the years to present our exploratory work and to benefit from the comments of the participants. In particular:

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Vasant Kaiwar and Sucheta Mazumdar

Introduction

■ The essays in this collection explore aspects of modernity in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa generated by the triangulation of romantic racialism, Orientalism, and nationalism, as well as their specific approaches to issues of time and space in the construction of “indigenous” modernist projects. In recent decades, a renewed, profound ambiguity about the processes, experiences, and results of capitalist modernization has emerged, even as the “premodern” has, in some cases, been thoroughly consigned to the museum of history.¹ In this context, assessments of modernity — which we define, drawing on elements from Jameson and Berman,² as the experiences of incomplete capitalist modernization and attempts to make sense of it or to tap into its rich potentialities while avoiding its pitfalls — have become a crucial arena of contention.³ The sense of crisis that the encounter with global capitalism, via the agency of colonial and imperial powers, first provoked during the colonial period — and now recapitulates in new forms with structural adjustment and related policies — has also produced an enormously productive reworking of the ideological and political resources afforded by the trio of forces mentioned above, whose advent coincides with the moment of capital’s comprehensive encircling of the globe, for the ends of political and cultural renewal.

While the essays in this volume do not directly investigate the political-economic processes that brought about a “Third World” or the universaliz-

ing impact of capital through the production and worldwide circulation of commodities that ties different regions of the world into a single economic framework, vastly expands the range of common media of exchange, and subjects disparate labor processes to a common value framework,⁴ this perspective is implicit in the historical documentation, analysis, and interpretation of the contours of modernity in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. After all, while modernity may be a universal and inescapable condition of the age of capital, its lineaments differ considerably according to one's location in the global division of labor and in the hierarchy of global power.

This uneven geography is crucial to understanding the sources of people's complementary-contradictory and tension-laden impulses, those incompatible interpretations of life's possibilities and limits, which they entertain even as they seek to bring order to the apparent disappearance of fixed signposts of all kinds by marking, categorizing, and demarcating new points of reference that might aid them in navigating modernity's challenges. Conceptualizing an antinomy — following Fredric Jameson — as the statement of two propositions “radically, indeed absolutely incompatible,” but which in their opposition fail to recognize certain common points of departure, we suggest that the complexities of modernity are best understood by examining its antinomies, at the core of which lie a compact set of ideas about the nature of economics, cultures, nations, identity, and alterity.⁵ Notions of time as that which precedes but anticipates “modernization,” no less than the time of modernization itself, and space, as the physical horizon of communities and nations, frame critical facets of modernity. At the same time, this compact set of ideas has resulted in different and quite incompatible totalizing schemes—a sign, one might say, that the points of departure are themselves subject to “genesis amnesia.”⁶

The attempt to construct secular histories, in which time, like value, constitutes a universal categorial referent, is arguably part and parcel of modernity. Premodern chronicles typically linked the specific group to which a particular chronicle applied to a personal deity or a savior, or told the story of secular rulers as analogues of the divine. With the advent of modernity, large horizontal linkages (*Volk*, “race,” etc.) began to replace smaller vertical ones within a purely secular notion of space.⁷ Simultaneously, clocked, calendrical time came to substitute cosmological notions of time.⁸ History became quintessentially the discipline of this novel kind of time, with “scientific” pretensions,⁹ even as science-articulated notions of race and politics began to grapple with “community” beyond the local.

Secular history, not as a mere chronicle of kings, queens, and saints, but as the “biography of a people,” at least theoretically presents a more democratic or populist notion. Such a biography is traceable through a people’s archive of achievements as manifested in archaeological, monumental, and documentary records, the story assuming heroic and epic proportions through sagas of migrations, wars, invasions, and conquests. Such history could also serve as a record of collective achievement, an invaluable resource for nationalist movements. The academic disciplines—philology, anthropology, and sociology in particular—that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century out of the breakup of the “master” discipline of political economy,¹⁰ produced “scientific” categories and significant bodies of thought that reduced apparently disparate phenomena to a few universal simples, while paradoxically aiding in the construction of locality that broke up the immanent universalism of the global capitalist system. It is the uneven geography of capitalist modernization, we argue, together with the elaboration of secular modes of thought grounded in the academic disciplines of time and space, that crystallized the dialectical tension between the universal and the particular. These developments are of great importance and form primary avenues of exploration in this volume.

In the pages that follow, we consider three critical categories—race, Orient, and nation—which, we contend, have become thoroughly imbricated with each other in the making of modernity. Both in their separate manifestations and together they have proven central to the particularization of modernity. While race mapped the coordinates of a world of visible and measurable difference, Orientalism arose as a powerful autonomous ideology positing culturally separate but mutually constituting worlds. European colonial control made for an important mediation in giving Orientalism a material manifestation via the rules of reproduction of colonial administration. Orientalism, in turn, constituted a notable component of anticolonial nationalism.¹¹ Orientalism’s myths have become central to identity politics in the postcolonial world, while nationalism, in turn, has become the great abstraction able to subsume previously autonomous projects within its gravitational field. The concept of nation provided voice and shape to certain universalist goals, such as the emancipation from colonial shackles and limits, self-determination, and so on. It has often also served to contain explosive tensions—those of class, for example—within the institutional frameworks of newly formed states that expressed, through their particularist mythographies, notions of racial destiny and community.

“Real life” experiences of dislocation, migration, and alienation were — to no one’s enduring satisfaction — smoothed away through submersion within the ontological structure of a community of fate and predestination.

All three categories operated not only to divide “us” from “them” but also, in their dialectically antithetical mode, as important avenues of solidarity. Equally, they express attempts to categorize and describe the world in an economical framework and to reduce the welter of reality to an easily transportable conceptual order. Their implicit universalism proved important to achieving this end, so that empirical complexity could often be dealt with through fairly straightforward deductive exercises. Thus universalist ambitions underlie every exercise in particularization, as they are part and parcel of global schemes of understanding the world that capitalism shapes. The universal and the particular appear not so much opposed as bound together in the unfolding of the process of which modernity itself is both a creation and an expression; the tensions implicit in this process give rise to some of the central antinomies of modernity.

Marx’s vision of modernity, for example, sprang from a radical universalism that saw the meltdown of the ancien régime and the many small communities sustaining a traditional way of life as the precondition for the reconstruction of production, distribution, and indeed of human community itself. Other voices have maintained that the “breakdown of communities, the psychic isolation of the individual, mass impoverishment and class polarization, cultural creativity springing from desperate moral and spiritual anarchy” constitute a parochial Western experience at best and that areas outside the heartland of capitalism could at least hope to avoid its economic and psychic turmoil.¹² Recent experience suggests how illusory those hopes might be. But what is important is the passion invested precisely in stating and restating that alternative possibility, even when the social and human costs have, at times, proven prohibitive.

An Overview

The origins of this volume go back to that period when political events like the Iranian Revolution, the rise to power of the Hindu Right in India, the long struggle against apartheid, the comprehensive breakdown of modernization projects and the beginnings of structural adjustment policies in the “Third World” engaged many of us. These issues generated conversations with colleagues across disciplinary boundaries, while challenging us to

rethink the established frames of national and regional area studies that had by and large excluded dialogue among people with shared histories of colonialism, capitalism, and modernity, the knowledge of which, it seems, had become a casualty of nationalist educational schemes remaining mostly entrapped in racialized and Orientalist frameworks.

Several of the essays in this volume were first published, in earlier versions, in *South Asia Bulletin*, a journal founded twenty years ago, and later, in 1993, expanded and renamed *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*. The journal itself grew out of our efforts to transcend the limited and limiting frameworks of knowledge produced within the coordinates of race, Orient, and nation and to develop a comparative and more comprehensive perspective of the forces that have shaped our contemporary realities.

Although the political events of the late 1970s and early 1980s first drew us into dialogue, the subsequent, visibly intensified reach of global capital and the transformations that occurred in its wake constitute the real genesis of this volume, providing the spur to reworking several of the essays and writing new ones. Ironically enough, much of the thinking about the modern and the postmodern since the 1980s has disengaged from closer investigations of the systemic dimensions of late capitalism.¹³ The rise to prominence of models of inquiry that foregrounded the local, and led a retreat into particularism and neonationalist cultural politics, seemed to offer limited avenues for understanding the tenacity, universality, and relevance to our time of certain concepts quintessentially modern and permeating the globe like the economic system itself. This is not to suggest that global capitalism, and the transnationalization of some aspects of culture, produce a “flat, uniform cosmopolitanism.”¹⁴ This volume meets the challenge to show that people do make history — with very specific and varied outcomes at that — constrained in part by political-economic realities, but also in part by the categories they marshal in doing so.

Continuity, tradition, and antiquity provide important symbolic resources to modernizing cultural and political projects in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The essays in this volume explore the ways in which romantic racialism, Orientalism, and nationalism — first articulated in their characteristic academic and political forms in Western Europe — have been indispensable to those projects in the rest of the world as well, particularly when the dominance of the West is questioned. The polemics that issue from these projects then feed into the further constructions of cultural

authenticity, political autonomy, and anti-Westernism. Global categories — spanning vast secular continuities of time and space — are apparently indispensable to the outgrowth of local particularisms.

The chapters by Vasant Kaiwar, Andrew Barnes, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, A.R. Venkatachalapathy, and Michael O. West show how these categories were deployed in the colonial and immediate postcolonial period. Romantic racialism and first-generation Orientalism — products of the revolutionary upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Europe’s disruptive encounter with modernization — were, Kaiwar maintains, as much manifestations of a crisis of confidence among sections of the European aristocracy and bourgeoisie, as a self-confident projection of European economic and epistemic power. They created the rich philological, historical, and social-scientific disciplinary resources that gave rise to unpredictable but powerful ideological currents in India, when colonial subjects appropriated the metropolitan categories and discourses to formulate arguments for parity with, or superiority to, their colonizers, and to construct hierarchies within the project of decolonization. These hierarchies — involving novel forms of resignifying socioeconomic and ascriptive differences (e.g., the racialization of caste) and spatialization (north-south, Aryan/insider-Muslim/outsider) — Kaiwar contends, have set in place powerful foundational myths of Indian nationalism and central elements of bourgeois culture in India.

Tavakoli-Targhi argues that Orientalism resulted from a dialogue and partnership between Indo-Iranian and European scholars, but that this collaboration became subject to systematic amnesia in the course of the nineteenth century, not only in Europe, where it might be understandable, but also in India and Iran, where it is harder to account for. This amnesia could take hold not simply because Europeans suppressed the knowledge of such collaboration, as Tavakoli-Targhi suggests, but also because Orientalism was, during this period, incorporated into the domain of racism and became a discourse of the inferiorization and marginalization of the “Orient.” This notion, playing into the world of nationalist scholarship in Iran and India, has produced a second amnesia about a common Indo-Persian world of scholarship that lasted into the twentieth century and has also led to the rival disparagement of scholarship and aptitude, recapturing in subaltern register the racism of the colonizers.

Barnes’s chapter illustrates one of the more eccentric, and seemingly preposterous, uses of the Aryan myth to work out “collaborative” relations