

Is Modernity Single and Universal?: *Ọ̀lájú* and the Multilateral Modernity

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Abstract

This essay confronts two orthodoxies at the heart of the modernity debate. The first is that modernity, which supposedly originated from the West, is a single and universal historical development. The assumption therefore is that any genuine modernity elsewhere must proceed from aping the structuration of western modernity. The second orthodoxy challenges the first, and coalesces around the idea of multiple modernities, which do not share the historical contours of western modernity. Yet, these modernities supposedly take their initiatives from the original source in the West. On the contrary, I will argue that these orthodoxies ignore a critical fact of global history: The concept of the modern was shaped and reshaped within a multilateral framework of confrontations and conflicts amongst cultures and societies, which enabled each society to creatively respond and adapt itself to the changes it confronted. I will use the Yorùbá concept of *ọ̀lájú* as a conceptual foil to reconfigure the understanding of this multilateral modernity. With *ọ̀lájú*, we arrive at the conclusion that both Europe and non-Europe are complicit in the formation and configuration of what it means to be modern. It is only from this premise that the foundation of multiple modernities can properly be erected. It is also from this premise that various societies can take charge of the elements of social change as well as the power and knowledge dynamics involved in it.

For many societies, modernity is the blunt impact of other people's history compressed and objectified in the form of hard and indigestible lumps of physical and social processes. Studying the adaptation of societies to modernity is therefore not merely a matter of confronting items that we label modern or traditional, but of understanding the confrontation between one's own history and the concentrated though always partial essence of experience extruded and communicated by other countries.

— J. P. Nettle¹

Introduction

The answer to the question raised by the title of this essay is far from being obvious, contrary to superficial expectations. And its implications for the conception and emergence of an African modernity are far from clear. The reason is simply that the assumption that lies behind the question, held by Eurocentric scholars, that modernity is fundamentally European, and by that fact, universal, with an inevitable mandate to transform the whole world into Europe's image is presently being critically unravelled as a false assumption. The catch, however, is that even the theory of multiple modernities under which the unravelling is being championed is also fundamentally flawed in its challenge to the hegemonic and homogenic self-understanding of European modernity. In this essay, I will argue that the critique of the European appropriation of the modern impulse not only leads to the opening of space for a multilateral idea of modernity and hence the *raison d'être* for multiple modernities, but also significantly that such a critique offers African societies a spot in the *locus modernus*, which they have not been able to appropriate ... yet. This appropriation, I will suggest, can benefit a great deal theoretically from the openness contained within the multilateral core of the Yorùbá concept of *òlájú* (or enlightenment).

The essay is divided into three parts. The first part examines the debates in the modernity literature concerning the provenance and reach of modernity and the plausible alternative construct within the multiple modernities discourse. In the second part, I interrogate the idea of the modern as a multilateral concept involving various impulses that essentially make the idea an impure and contaminated one contrary to European protestations. Lastly, in the third part, I outline the concept of *òlájú* as an indigenous alternative perspective on what it means to be properly modern.

1. J. P. Nettle. *Political Mobilization*. London: Faber and Faber, 1967: 389.

Modernity at Large: Europe, Non-Europe and Global History

The assumptions that surround the emergence and constitution of European modernity as well as the challenge to these assumptions all revolve round the discipline of global history. In its ideological manifestation, global history is simply patterned to mirror the “teleology of the ‘rise of the West’,”² and hence to ultimately represent the embodiment of a “universal human history,” which the Hegelian absolute spirit spreads around the globe. This specifically crafted historicism constructed the modern project as a unique European phenomenon, “as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it.”³ This historicism not only made the emergence of industries the First Industrial Revolution, it ultimately made possible “completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment.”⁴

Thus, “history’s conceptual site is modernity”⁵ and the historical axioms underlying the latter are circumscribed by Eurocentricity and determinacy in such a way that the modern impulse coincides with a particular epochal evolution in European history (usually represented as post-medieval). Such axioms would include:

... first, that modern European culture is to be distinguished absolutely in both time and space from all Other cultures and that the institutions and qualities representing it (whatever exactly they are) arose *uniquely* and *within* Europe itself. Second and relatedly, that these qualities and institutions, therefore, make Europe the only “authentic subject” of modernity, into which it “ushered” the rest of the world. Third and as a corollary, this modernity consists only of the imposition of European models onto Other societies, which either imitate them or reject them outright: such societies being deemed incapable *a priori* of fashioning their own creative responses. And fourth, where they reject European modernity, they do so on the basis of wholly different (and, by definition, Irrational) cultural Traditions.⁶

2. Harriet T. Zurndorfer. “The Discipline of World History and the Economic and Social History of the Orient: A New Fashion in an Old Hat?” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, no. 3 (1998): 241.

3. Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000: 7. Emphasis added.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Peter van der Veer. “The Global History of ‘Modernity.’” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, no. 3 (1998): 285.

6. David Washbrook. “The Global History of ‘Modernity’: A Response to a Reply.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, no. 3 (1998): 299.

Peter van der Veer's idea of modernity particularly reflects these axioms. According to him, it is useful to characterize modernity fundamentally as a project, "a political notion which [originates in the Enlightenment, and] is realized in the nation-state. The spread of this political notion leads to its clash as well as its articulation with a multiplicity of histories in different parts of the world".⁷ This transition to modernity, for van der Veer, occurred between 1750 and 1850, and its markers were basically political and cultural. This political modernity — manifested by such modern institutions like the state, the bureaucracy, and capitalism — also generates its own conceptual supplements that are supposedly difficult to think of without a link to their European lineage. Such concepts include that of citizenship, the state, the public sphere, civil society, human rights, rule of law, popular sovereignty, the individual, the public-private dichotomy, democracy, social justice, scientific rationality, etc.⁸

The incidence of these concepts and categories in other non-European societies points at the hegemonic and homogenic reach of the modernity project through the process of European expansion. The clash with other non-European societies, in van der Veer's opinion, became necessary within the Hegelian historiography because it was a means of spreading the Enlightenment rationality and the idea of the nation-state, the sole bearer of political modernity.⁹ In other words, these "Other" societies as well as their historical forms of social life and governmentality constitute in their totality a "negation of modernity," a kind of alterity that makes the colonial project inevitable. Political modernity therefore not only creates a self-theory about its generative capacity; that generative logic operates on the assumption of unilineal European determinacy.

While it is not difficult to accept as a historical fact, the hegemonic and homogenic force of European modernity especially in the framing of "the critical limits within which experiences of modernity operate" around the globe,¹⁰ several other queries and issues cannot similarly be taken for granted. If the modern impulse supposedly originated in Europe, then we can ask: "Were there similar developments in other civilizations, and if so, when did they occur? If they occurred at this time, were they primarily due to diffusion or to indigenous factors?"¹¹ Furthermore, if these modern developments are due to diffusion, why is the experience of modernity between Europe and non-

7. Van der Veer, "The Global History of 'Modernity,'" 285.

8. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

9. Van der Veer, "The Global History of 'Modernity,'" 287.

10. Washbrook, "The Global History of 'Modernity,'" 297.

11. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter. "Introduction: paths to early modernities — a comparative view." *Daedalus* 127 (1998): 2.

Europe so variegated and different? And if the developments are due to indigenous factors, what do these tell us about the supposedly unilineal influence of European modernity and its self-theory?

Answers to these questions generate the alternative framework for speculating about the modern impulse and its global significance. This framework challenges the supposed singularity of Europe in the constitution of the modernity project in favor of multiple modernities. Thus, contrary to its insistence on its relevance as a universal discourse, Europe, in Gadamer's words, "... since 1914 has become provincialized."¹² The necessity for a provincializing argument, for Chakrabarty, does not so much derive from the regional Europe whose decentring is already being effected by history, as we shall soon see. Rather, there is another Europe as "an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in *clichéd and shorthand forms* in some everyday habits of thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social sciences to address questions of political modernity"¹³ not only in South Asia for Chakrabarty, but also everywhere the hegemonic and homogenic influence is felt.

However, the arguments for multiple modernities interrogate or decenter Europe differently. Proponents such as Eisenstadt, while arguing for a multiple sense of modernity, do so from the premise of a European origin of the modern impulse in the "sense of many roads leading to Rome."¹⁴ Eisenstadt argues that a re-examination of the study of modernities becomes imperative given the significance of the "provincialising questions" asked earlier. Such a re-examination necessitates the evolution of a new approach, which must avoid three fallacies:

... first, that there is only one modernity; second, that looking from the West to the East legitimates the concept of "Orientalism"; and finally, that globalization and multiculturalism ought to be regarded as indications that a new axial principle has in fact emerged, which goes under the name of postmodernity.¹⁵

We will only be concerned with the first fallacy in this essay. This fallacy would be the sort found in van der Veer's argument for the "uniqueness and power of European modernity," which advocates of multiple modernities want to undermine. Ironically, however, van der Veer and most other advocates of multiple modernities, especially Eisenstadt, share a lot of assumptions; assumptions that are not affected by the interrogation of this first fallacy. For instance, van der Veer insists that the beauty of European modernity derives

12. Gadamer, cited in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 2.

13. Chakrabarty, 4. Emphasis added.

14. van der Veer, "The Global History of 'Modernity,'" 286.

15. Eisenstadt and Schluter, "Introduction," 2.

from its self-theory, which imposes on it the “ineluctable destiny” of recreating the world in its own image. This made it possible for European modernity to generate complexity and variations in “its clash with historical processes in many parts of the world.”¹⁶ Eisenstadt’s multiple modernities argument took as its premise an “original” modernity, which originated in Europe and whose diffusion to other parts of the world was just short of the assumption of the convergence that comes with the self-theory argument.

The argument for modernity’s self-theory commences with the assumption that the modern coincides with a particular temporal epoch in European history. This epoch is usually conceived as post-medieval (with the ‘post’ signalling a clean rupture with medievalism). As the third significant epoch in a historical chronology beginning with the ancient, the modern period — encompassing the Renaissance and the Enlightenment — became a shorthand for the emergence of a European industrial civilization defined by a set of features: “capital formation, resource mobilization, enhancement of labor productivity and forces of production, centralization of political power, establishment of national identities, expansion of rights of political participation, and secularization of values.”¹⁷

Once the question of the beginning of the modern period has been dealt with in this sense, it becomes a trivial issue (and this is the whole essence of van der Veer’s argument) whether we can actually be talking of multiple modernities. There is only one modern age, and hence one modernity which, of course, does not obviate “an infinite number of possible varieties in cultural patterns, beliefs, and commitments as well as in institutional specificity within the framework of this encompassing epoch.”¹⁸ The common institutional, political, technological, and cultural thread in all these varieties is what *modernity* signifies. Thus, from their evolution in the European context, these features have converged in various societies into ahistorical and acultural conditions of modern transformation and development that every society must duplicate in order to progress.¹⁹

However, the evolutionary path these modern features took into their convergent ahistorical character in many other non-European societies was a violent one. For the advocates of a unique European modernity as well as others who challenged the fallacy of one modernity, this is not a particularly

16. van der Veer, “The Global History of ‘Modernity,’” 285.

17. Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990: 2.

18. Bjorn Wittrock. “Modernity: One, None, or Many? European Origins and Modernity as a Global Condition,” *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 31–32.

19. Adeshina Afolayan. “Is Postmodernism Meaningful in Yoruba?” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (2008): 212–213.

disconcerting issue. This is because, for van der Veer, European expansion through discovery and colonial conquest was actually the vehicle that enabled the articulation of that modernity project “with a multiplicity of histories in different parts of the world.”²⁰

Eisenstadt and other opponents of the one-modernity thesis went beyond these assumptions to lay the foundation of what they called “multiple modernities.” In the first place, for Eisenstadt, the homogenic and hegemonic assumption behind the expansion of Europe in the eighteenth century is belied by the fact that there was no actual evidence of the replication of European modernity in other societies. Rather, “the expansion of modernity beyond Europe has to be viewed not as a process of repetition *but as the crystallization of new civilizations ...*”²¹ Thus, the project of multiple modernities was inaugurated with the creative appropriation of the original impulse of European modernity by non-European societies *in their own terms*:

The appropriation of themes of modernity made it possible for these [societies] to incorporate some of the Western universalistic elements of modernity in the construction of their own new collective identities, without necessarily giving up specific components of their traditional identities...²²

The problem with this dimension of the multiple modernities project goes beyond its interrogation of the one-modernity fallacy. In confronting that fallacy, it created its own: the original-modernity fallacy. In other words, Eisenstadt and other advocates of this dimension of multiple modernities failed significantly to interrogate the arrogance of Europe that lies at the heart of these fallacies. The logic of an original modern impulse from which Eisenstadt constructed the teleology of multiple modernities only leads to an absurd conclusion that flies in the face of the facts of world history. In other words, if modernity is uniquely European, then other non-European societies had to wait within their traditional penumbra for that original impulse to jumpstart their own emergence into the *locus modernus*.

However, we can accept the European origin of modernity only if we accept the false presupposition not only that both European and non-European societies were “traditional” and hence “closed” societies, but that Europe escaped its insularity through an evolutionary miracle, which somehow was not available to other societies, which then awaited the civilizing and modernizing

20. van der Veer, “The Global History of ‘Modernity,’” 285.

21. Eisenstadt and Schlacter, “Introduction,” 2–3. Emphasis added.

22. Shmuel Eisenstadt. “Multiple Modernities.” *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 14–15.

light of European modernity.²³ Eisenstadt even argues that “Just as the expansion of all historical civilization, [European] modernity undermined the symbolic and institutional premises of the societies incorporated into it, *opening up new options and possibilities.*”²⁴ Thus, the logic of European determinism and non-European negation central to the original-modernity/one-modernity theses “excludes the peoples of the non-European world from any meaningful participation in what (for good or ill) has been the dominant course of their own history over the last two hundred years.”²⁵

In “Eurocentrism and Modernity,” Enrique Dussel challenges this logic of an original impulse of modernity in Europe. Contrary to the Habermasian claim that the European discoveries were subsequent to the formation of European modernity, Dussel argues that “the experience not only of ‘discovery’ but especially of ‘conquest’ is essential in the constitution of the modern ego, not only as subjectivity per se but as a subjectivity that is the ‘center’ and ‘end’ of history.”²⁶ Other critics, like Washbrook, based their project of multiple modernities on what can be called Europe’s “denial of coevalness,” which sees world history in terms of “a single, overpowering trend [rather than] in terms of multiple trends, reversible patterns, and cycles.”²⁷ That is, flowing from an analysis of global history, they are skeptical whether all the unique cultural qualities and institutions considered to have evolved uniquely within Europe were actually unique or did evolve.

Consider the problem of change involved in the explanation of the origination and authenticity of European modernity. According to Washbrook, the original-modernity thesis generates the issue of “essences” that resonates, for instance, in Edward Said’s thesis of Orientalism. In other words, the assumption that before modernity, Europe and non-Europe were made up of closed societies, also presupposes that these societies were essentially different and insular without any form of interaction. We are thus confronted with the problem of explaining the emergence of those modern features and conditions that were hitherto not there. What historical changes and mutations were responsible for the modernity of Europe out of the “darkness” of traditionality? In answering these questions, the advocates of the original-modernity thesis

23. David Washbrook. “From Comparative Sociology to Global History: Britain and India in the Pre-History of Modernity.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, no. 4 (1997): 413.

24. Shmuel Eisenstadt. “Multiple Modernities in an Age of Globalization.” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 24, no. 2 (1999): 284. Emphasis added.

25. Washbrook, “The Global History of ‘Modernity,’” 298.

26. Enrique Dussel. “Eurocentrism and Modernity.” *boundary 2* 20, no. 3 (1993): 74.

27. Zurndorfer, “The Discipline of World History and the Economic and Social History of the Orient,” 241.

ignored the facts of global history for an evolutionary theory, which conceives of change biologically as a function of some kind of internal mysteriousness.²⁸

This evolutionary path, which was meant to preserve the aura of authenticity necessary for asserting an original modernity native to Europe, was preceded by what Washbrook calls “an epistemological revolution” in which “Western historiography and sociology proceeded to ‘unlearn’ much which they had known in the past [not only about their continuity with their historical traditions but also] about similarities and overlaps with Other societies and about how much of the West’s own culture derived from them.”²⁹

Yet, history tells a different story. On the one hand, Bjorn Wittrock trenchantly argues that history raises the doubt that the historical societies of the West were actually all modern or had an incisive break with tradition in their supposed convergence toward modernity. In other words, for the convergence theory to be adequate as a definition of an epochal modern age that is universal, then the concept of the modern must be enunciated in terms of certain necessary conditions, which all European societies fulfilled to be considered the original birth place of modernity. However, according to him, history proves that some of those “conditions of modernity” were so very geoculturally sparse across these European societies that it would not be right to claim that modernity was one pan-European phenomenon. Wittrock further argues:

The economic order associated with the modern age is often seen to be that of a liberal market economy and free trade, the political order that of a nation-state or a constitutional republic ... Even if we limit our attention to the European setting, we run into immediate problems if we take these forms of economic and political order to be necessary defining characteristics, the *sine qua non*, of the modern era. It is sometimes customary to speak of the late nineteenth century as a period of organized or interventionist modernity and capitalism as opposed to a previous period of more genuine and nonregulated forms of economic order. This is true for some countries, such as Britain. For many others there simply was no previous period of noninterventionist market interactions and free trade. In these countries ... a state-oriented economic order ... was constitutive of the economic order of modernity from its very inception ... As to political order ... virtually no European country had the type of political

28. Washbrook, “From Comparative Sociology to World History,” 413–414.

29. *Ibid.*: 414.

order that theorists now define as emblematic of modernity, i.e., that of a democratic nation-state.³⁰

On the other hand, apart from its inability to achieve a decisive rupture with its historical traditions, Europe also owed a lot to non-European societies, especially those in Eurasia in terms of the shared characteristics and global interactions that went into the making of the supposedly unique modernity. Washbrook, for instance, specifically contends that the interrelation that existed between Britain and India was significant in the definition of the industrialization of the former. For Washbrook, the historical context producing Britain's initial turn towards industrialization was so multifaceted and complex that one could reasonably ask whether she could have been so technologically and industrially different from eighteenth-century India "outside the context of its [imperialistic] relationships with other parts of the world including, in several key areas, India."³¹ A case in point, for him, was the cotton-textile manufacture of the eighteenth century. The industrialization, or what he calls the "con-textilisation" of Britain came at a historical juncture when India was clearly the world's dominant cotton manufacturer. This product played a crucial role in the take-off of Britain's economic and technological growth. India supplied both the products and the requisite knowledge on design and weaving methods. It was the appropriation of these methods and products that, for Washbrook, gives Britain its crucial advantage in industrialization.³²

What insights therefore could be drawn from this interrogation of the one-modernity/original-modernity thesis? What significance for historiography can we deduce from the epistemology of cultural relations among societies and cultures? We attempt to answer these questions in the next section.

Multilateralism and the Idea of the Modern

My strategy in this section is to argue that from the conceptual analysis of the idea of modernity, we can achieve its critique as a multilateral concept. The multilateralism of modernity is what the original-modernity thesis denies through its evolutionary sleight of hand. However, global history as far back as the seventeenth century would insist that modernity be understood as a contaminated term, which belies the originality claim.

Multilateralism becomes a critical interjection that attempts to redress the epistemological act of denial and excuses that refuse to recognize the

30. Wittrock, "Modernity: One, None, or Many?" 34–35.

31. Washbrook, "From Comparative Sociology to World History," 419.

32. *Ibid.*: 417.

conceptual contamination of the modern. The European conception of the modern grew out of internalist evolutionary dynamics that conceived modernity as a pure process of historical evolution that excludes the contaminated contributions of not only non-European societies but also the traditional European pasts. This epistemological act of denial could be seen to have arisen from the wrong assumption that the conceptual contamination of the modern is, by that fact, criminal. On the contrary, however, the contamination of the character of the modern invests it with a conceptual robustness that circumvents any ethnocentric designs. Thus, Europe becomes guilty of cultural presumptiveness that motivated a false and pernicious universalism that excludes the non-European contributions to the robustness of the multilateral modernity.

Multilateralism evolved initially as a term in international relations. It addresses the urgent need for a concert of nations and states working together on several issues. As defined by Miles Kahler, multilateralism is the “international governance of the ‘many’.”³³ It is meant to serve as an “opposition to bilateral and discriminatory arrangements that were believed to enhance the leverage of the powerful over the weak and to increase international conflict.”³⁴ The advantage of multilateralism is substitution of a levelling dynamics that takes the sail out of the Eurocentric exclusionary possessiveness, or what Slemon calls “proprietary backyardism.”³⁵ Within the universe of international relations amongst states, therefore, multilateralism requires non-discriminatory and non-hegemonic open admission that allows multiple participations. In this sense, multilateralism seeks to intervene in global power relations along political, economic and cultural lines. We can say, therefore, that it represents a conceptual moderation of some of the institutional manifestations of modernity — the nation-state and capitalist economy — as well as the attempt to integrate the disaffection emanating from the third world, which felt marginalized within the reigning world order post-1945. For Cox,

Multilateralism has to be considered from the standpoint of its ability to represent the forces at work in the world at the local level as well as at the global level. What about aspirations for autonomy and a voice in world affairs by micro-regions or fragments of existing states? How

33. Miles Kahler. “Multilateralism with small and large numbers.” *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992): 681.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Stephen Slemon. “Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World.” In Padmini Mongia (ed.) *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. London: Arnold, 1997: 73.

can the less powerful be represented effectively? Who will negotiate for the biosphere which humanity shares interdependently with other forms of life?³⁶

Flowing from the above, it becomes easy to arrive, by corollary reflection, at the universalist aspiration of the multilateral impulse in human affairs. In other words, through what John Ruggie calls "generalized organizing principles,"³⁷ we can begin to outline a historical dialectical framework that allows us to recalibrate the concept of the modern that is truly and concretely universal. Modernity aspires to a universal status; multilateralism attempts to concretize such universalism through the widening of its space to admit historical exigencies, practices, institutions, and meanings. Through an approach that Cox calls "historical dialectics," we can initiate

... an assessment of the dominant tendencies in existing world order, and proceeds to an identification of the antagonisms generated within that order which could develop into turning points for structural transformation. Multilateralism, in this context, will be perceived as in part the institutionalization and regulation of existing order, and in part the site of struggle between conservative and transformative forces. Multilateralism's meanings and purposes, and thus the new or changed structures which multilateralism may help to create, are to be derived from its relationship to the stresses and conflicts in world order.³⁸

As a site of transformation, multilateralism demands a non-hegemonic reconstitution of the framework of universalism that has become inescapable for the concept of modernity. The first condition for the resignification of modernity therefore begins with resignifying its universalism. Cox calls this the need for a "post-hegemonic order" within the conception of the modern.³⁹ Seyla Benhabib considers it as the need to concretize the universal as a means of intervening in the charged relationship between the self and the other.

In "Concrete Universality and Critical Theory," Benhabib sets for herself the challenge of concretizing the universal as a means of undermining what she calls a generalized perception of the Other. According to her, there are two visions of universalism: the first generalizes the Other as being entitled to the

36. Robert W. Cox. "Multilateralism and world order." *Review of International Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 162-163.

37. John Ruggie. "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution." *International Organization* 46, no. 3 (1992): 571.

38. Cox, "Multilateralism and world order," 177.

39. *Ibid.*: 180.

same rights and duties that the Self would grant itself; the second considers those different from us as “‘concrete other’ with specific histories, needs, and trajectories.”⁴⁰ In other words, the first conception of universalism reserves the discursive space of the universal solely for the Self, with only a less than substantive recognition of the Other. The perception of the concrete other as a being with substantive cultural baggage serves to undermine the sparse attribution of formal universalism and eventually constitutes the platform on which “universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity” can be erected.⁴¹

Universalism, the way we have come to understand and hate it, comes with a strong sense of ethnocentric presumptions. Benhabib outlines two strong senses that capture these presumptions:

1. It may signify the philosophical belief that there is a fundamental human nature or human essence that defines who we are as humans....
2. Universalism in contemporary philosophical debates has come to mean, most prominently, a justification strategy.... [J]ustificatory universalists may not be essentialists: some may entertain very few rock-bottom beliefs about human nature and psychology. But they all share strong beliefs in the normative content of human reason — that is, in the validity of procedures of inquiry, evidence, and questioning that have been considered the cognitive legacy of Western philosophy since the Enlightenment. Impartiality, objectivity, intersubjective verification of results, arguments and data, consistency of belief, and self-reflexivity minimally define this normative content.⁴²

From these two dimensions of universalism, we uncover the subtle project of ethnocentric ascription, which sees in the Western Enlightenment a set of universally valid values and principles that define human nature absolutely and ahistorically. Universalizing the values of the Enlightenment ensures that all non-Europeans become adequately generalized to the point of phenomenological invisibility that occludes their concrete histories and subjectivities. The tragedy of the generalized Other is simply that such a generalization emerged

40. Seyla Benhabib. “Concrete Universality and Critical Social Theory.” *Concordia: International Journal of Philosophy* 51 (2007): 23.

41. Seyla Benhabib. *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002: 37; Seyla Benhabib. “Cultural Complexity, Moral Interdependence, and the Global Dialogic Community.” In Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (eds.) *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995: 251.

42. Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture*, 26-27.

from within the sociocultural framework of the West. Benhabib therefore rightly judges that questioning whether universalism is ethnocentric

... betrays an anxiety that has haunted the West since the conquest of the Americas. It grows from beliefs that Western ways of life and systems of value are radically different from those of other civilizations. This widespread anxiety rests on false generalizations about the West itself, about the homogeneity of its identity, the uniformity of its developmental processes, and the cohesion of its value systems. The suggestion that universalism is ethnocentric often also presupposes a homogenizing view of other cultures and civilizations, neglecting elements in them that may be perfectly compatible with, and may even lie at the root of, the West's own discovery of universalism.⁴³

Such a view fails, she argues, to take cognizance of the "complex global dialogue across cultures and civilizations" enabled by the "in-between space of commerce and confrontation, battle and association."⁴⁴

These sociological and historical facts of cultural engagements are exactly at the basis of the emergence of modernity as what Benhabib calls "a worldwide process and phenomenon."⁴⁵ This gives validity to the conception of the modern as a sociohistorical governance of the many. And the "many" here will reference the diverse cultural manifestations brought together in trade, wars, conquests, and all manners of confrontations. Modernity, in this sense, serves as a conceptual framework which regulates the consequences of these confrontations; the conceptual representation of a community of interdependence that emerged a long time ago as a critical dimension of universal history. The best we can say for its relationship with the West is that "the most significant elements constituting it were first *assembled* in the West."⁴⁶ The word "assembled" constitutes a significant departure from the assumptions behind the one-modernity and original-modernity fallacies. We are even entitled to remain skeptical even of that most minimal of concession to European modernity. Historical facts become a double-edged sword pointing at "wide circles of ecumenical discourse, extensive peripatetic populations and networks of 'trade and civilisation' crossing countries and continents in the pre-modern world."⁴⁷

43. Ibid: 24.

44. Ibid: 25, 41.

45. Benhabib, "Cultural Complexity, Moral Interdependence, and the Global Dialogic Community," 252.

46. Ibid. emphasis added.

47. Washbrook, "The Global History of 'Modernity'," 301.

We will end this section by taking serious Robert Cox's suggestion of a "post-hegemonic order," which can serve as the basis of a reconceptualization of the universal and the modern. Since, for him, "Previous hegemonic orders have derived their universals from the dominant society, itself the product of a dominant civilization, a post-hegemonic order would have to derive its normative content in a search for common ground among constituent traditions of civilization. What might be this common ground?"⁴⁸ Such a common ground presupposes two conditions:

A first condition would be mutual recognition of distinct traditions of civilization, perhaps the most difficult step especially for those who have shared a common hegemonic perspective, and who are unprepared to forsake the security of belief in a natural order that is historically based on universalizing from one position of power in one form of civilization. A second condition for a post-hegemonic order would be to move beyond the point of mutual recognition towards a kind of supra-intersubjectivity that would provide a bridge among the distinct and separate intersubjectivities of the different coexisting traditions of civilization.⁴⁹

A Theory of the Modern: *Òlájú* as *Locus Modernus*

Òlájú is an indigenous concept deriving from the sociological experience of the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria with trade, migration, travels, education, and religion. The condition for its significance derives, first, from the affirmation of the violence of European modernity on non-European societies. According to Washbrook,

... most societies in the world ... have been subjected to powerful universalising and homogenising forces from Europe ... [T]hese forces have been involved in framing the critical limits within which experiences of modernity operate: the modern state, engagement with a trans-national capitalist system, exposure to a globalised culture, even the re-generation of "neo-traditions." Whatever happens inside the modern world is confined by these conceptual schema.⁵⁰

In other words, this concept is meant to demonstrate, contrary to Eurocentric universalism, the historicity of modernity, especially at the intersection of knowledge, power, and social change in the pursuit of worldly progress.

48. Cox, "Multilateralism and world order," 180.

49. Ibid.

50. Washbrook, "The Global History of 'Modernity'," 297.

In this regard, I mean it to serve as the conceptual locus for the multilateral understanding of the constitution of modernity within the interstice of cultural confrontations. It thus celebrates the impurity of the modern as an end achieved through entanglement as well as a deliberate and voluntary local action.

Ọ̀lájú, in Yorùbá, simply means “the opening of the eyes to see.” It derives from two key words: *ojú* meaning the eyes and *lílà* which translates as “opening.” Thus, when the Yorùbá say: *ọ̀lájú ti dé* (*ọ̀lájú* has come) or *ọ̀lájú ti pọ̀ sí i'* (*ọ̀lájú* has increased), they reference simultaneously both the signifiers of modernity (electricity, transportation, healthcare, tarred roads, pipe-born water, etc.) as well as the experience of collective enlightenment. Worldly progress, for them, translates as a progressive enlightenment through the gradual opening of the eyes to see. When the eyes open to see, we achieve by that fact an epistemic state of an enlarged consciousness that recognizes the limited horizon of a society's worldview and the possibility of social change through voluntary and moderated interaction with other societies. Within the conceptual space of *ọ̀lájú*, open-minded sensibility comes with the condition of epistemic vigilance towards social progress. This is because every social relation is a relation of knowledge and power.

According to Peel, “*Ọ̀lájú* was first *definitely* used ... to refer to the cultural package brought from outside by, above all, the missionaries.”⁵¹ The impurity of *ọ̀lájú*, alluded to earlier, carries an ambivalent burden. It places the concept at the intersection of both the positive and negative signifiers of enlightenment and modernity. This ambivalence is signalled by the Yorùbá statement ‘*gbogbo ayé ti yí padà nitorí ọ̀lájú ti dé* (there are all sorts of changes in the world as a result of *ọ̀lájú*). Specifically, however, *ọ̀lájú* has a negative import: *kà sí ibòwò f'ágbà mọ; àwọn ọmọ ti l'ajú s'òdì* (there is no longer adequate respect for the elders because the children are now excessively enlightened).⁵²

There are also positive statements that signal that enlightenment has not always been the result of changes happening inordinately to a particular society: *ọ̀lájú ti sọ ayé di didára ju títijò lẹ* (*ọ̀lájú* has made the world better than before) or *ayé n' l'ajú sí i n'ípa l'gbàgbò* (the world is becoming more enlightened through Christianity).⁵³

This ambivalence of *ọ̀lájú* serves to remove from it any excessive arrogance and optimism that characterizes the European idea of the modern. More than this, it gives it a universalism that is not unvocal but gives room for multi-lateral development and possibilities that give modernity a robust character

51. J. D. Y. Peel. “*Ọ̀lájú*: A Yoruba Concept of Development.” *The Journal of Development Studies* 14, no. 2 (1978): 147.

52. *Ibid.*: 143.

53. *Ibid.*: 142.

beyond imperial ambitions. In other words, there are no human societies that foreclose the possibility of gradual enlightenment, the opening of the eyes to see as a result of constant confrontations with other societies. Thus, for Peel, "... the linguistic vehicle of our central concept is, I believe, significant for how it enables particular experiences, distinct in time and space, variously solitary or shared, to be *linked* into something of a unified interpretation of a collective historical experience"⁵⁴

The Yorùbá experienced European modernity and its violence. Yet, it was not just an event that happened to them willy-nilly. In other words, it was not a case of a hapless encounter between a strong force and a passive recipient of its consequences. The native is not a silent object and his society a blank tablet on which the cultural agenda of colonialism and modernity is inscribed with all its attendant violence. Rather, *òlájú* excavates a space of multilateral confrontations and compromises between the old and the new, the local and the foreign, the good and the bad. In a deep sociological study of the Yorùbá, Fadipe outlines the various social and cultural changes, ranging from the educational to the economic; changes to the family and kinship system, inheritance, marriage, and so on. He particularly singles out the religious influences of Islam and Christianity, with the latter furnishing "the greatest protagonists of change."⁵⁵ Christianity, for instance, forced a loosening of the traditional kinship ties under the onslaught of "the greater desire for independence, individuality and exclusiveness (arising from material prosperity) ..."⁵⁶ However, Fadipe contends:

Indeed the most striking and universal feature of these changes is the plurality and heterogeneity of attitudes to be observed in place of the relative unity and uniformity which prevailed in the earlier period in regard to any given item of custom. What subsequently happened was not simply a replacement of old values by new ones throughout the entire society. Rather, we have the old and new existing side by side, while in between are compromise [integrated] values.⁵⁷

In fact, for Fadipe, two unintended consequences of these confrontations between the old and the new serve to reinforce the tenacity of local action on the modern offering. First, the discursive space created by *òlájú* made it possible for the enlargement of the narrow circumference of the kinship principle

54. Ibid: 158

55. N. A. Fadipe. *The Sociology of the Yoruba*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970: 316.

56. Ibid: 320.

57. Ibid: 317. See also J. A. Atanda. *An Introduction to Yoruba History*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1980: 61.

under the influence of “the brotherhood of man idea which the period of slavery and of persecution helped to develop among the Christians and which has also been readily accepted by both Muslims and non-believers.”⁵⁸ Second, in spite of the deep influence Christianity achieved, especially in the loosening of the traditional bounds of the Yorùbá society, according to Fadipe, “the Yorùbá Christian does not altogether surrender his judgment in the borrowing of items of culture from Europeans. He no longer throws all his traditional customs and practices overboard just because he admires Western European culture ... [For instance] ... very few Yorùbá would like to rear their children in the way the white man does.”⁵⁹ With this, it seems incontrovertible that

... the divergent responses of the world’s peoples arguably maintain or increase their cultural diversity at the same time that they become more deeply entwined with capitalist influences, institutions, and impositions. Hence the paradox that people in different world areas increasingly share aspirations, material standards, and social institutions at the same time that their local definition of and engagement with these initiatives fuels cultural distinctiveness.⁶⁰

The fact of confrontations between different cultures necessarily raises the issue of the creative responses available to the receiving culture. This suggests, I suspect, that modernity grows as a gradual process within the continual illuminatory boundary of the constant enlightenment that contact and confrontation bring. Enlightenment happens to societies in constant contact with other societies and at different rates. Modernity is a process borne out of creative adaptability that leads to the multilateral manufacture of cultural possibilities and institutions. Thus, multilateralism is to modernity what hybridity is to colonialism. And we can add that it is within its multilateral framework that modernity achieves its phenomenal status.

Conclusion

The title of this essay hints at two orthodoxies. The first is that modernity, which supposedly originated from the West, is a single and universal historical development. The assumption therefore is that any genuine modernity elsewhere must proceed from aping the structuration of western modernity. The second orthodoxy takes off from challenging the first. It coalesced around

58. Ibid: 327–328.

59. Ibid: 328.

60. Bruce M. Knauff. “Critically Modern: An Introduction.” In Knauff (ed.) *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002: 2.

the idea of multiple modernities, which do not share the historical contours of western modernity. Yet, these modernities were supposed to have taken their initiatives from the original source in the West. On the contrary, we have argued that the contention that modernity began primarily or originally in the West ignores the critical fact of global history. This fact is that the concept of the modern was shaped and reshaped within a multilateral framework of confrontations and conflicts amongst cultures and societies, which enabled each society to creatively respond and adapt itself to the changes it confronted. I have used the Yorùbá concept of *òlájú* as a conceptual foil to reconfigure the understanding of this multilateral modernity. With *òlájú*, we arrive at the conclusion that both Europe and non-Europe are complicit in the formation and configuration of what it means to be modern. The modern spirit roams the entire world. It is only from this premise that the foundation of multiple modernities can properly be erected. It is also from this premise that various societies can take charge of the elements of social change as well as the power and knowledge dynamics involved in it. This essentially brings such a society into a critical dialogue with itself and with others.

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