

# Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category

We are weighed down, every moment, by  
the conception and sensation of Time.

*Charles Bandelaire*

Few thickets are more tangled than that in which the idea of modernity has become enmeshed, few topics less likely to inspire confidence than the question of its relations to the 'postmodern'. Not least of the problems concerns the character and status of the concept of modernity itself. For it is far from clear that the main figures in recent debates have been writing about, and disputing, the same set of issues when the term has been used. This is of course, in one sense, precisely the point: it is the meaning of 'modernity' that is in dispute, and the argument is hardly just terminological. Nonetheless, there remains considerable scope for reflection about what kind of concept 'modernity' is, and in particular for a more systematic consideration of the relations between its various uses. What follows is offered as a preliminary contribution to this task.\*

I shall concentrate on three distinct but connected approaches to the problem: the ideas of modernity as a *category of historical periodization*, a *quality of social experience*, and an (incomplete) *project*. Underlying and unifying my account are a concern, derived in large part from the writings of Benjamin and Koselleck, with modernity as a distinct but paradoxical form of temporality, and a reading of the modernism/postmodernism controversy as a dispute in the politics of the philosophy of history.

I take as my starting point and thematic perspective Perry Anderson's critique of Marshall Berman's 'recovery' and celebration of modernity, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*.<sup>1</sup> Berman's book offers, I believe, the most immediately appealing general account of modernity currently available; whereas Anderson's critique strikes at, but only partially hits, what I take to be both the main problem with the concept and the source of its enduring strength—namely, its homogenization through abstraction of a form of historical consciousness associated with a variety of socially, politically and culturally heterogeneous processes of change. The key to the matter will be seen to lie in the relation between the meaning of 'modernity' as a category of historical periodization and its meaning as a distinctive form or quality of social experience—that is to say, in the dialectics of a certain *temporalization of history*.

### Modernity and Modes of Production: Berman and Anderson

Anderson's objections to Berman's account of modernity are fourfold. In the first place, he is seen to have produced an egregiously one-sided version of Marx's account of capitalist modernization, which falls prey to an uncritical, because undifferentiated, concept of historical time. This is reflected, secondly, in an abstract and 'perennial' notion of modernism that fails to register the historical specificity of aesthetic modernism as a portmanteau concept for what is, in fact, a set of distinct if conjuncturally related movements, which are in any case now definitively over. Thirdly, his modernist ontology of unlimited self-development, although apparently derived from Marx, is actually based in an idealist form of radical liberalism which, from a materialist standpoint at least, is self-contradictory. Finally, Berman's account of modernity as permanent revolution removes from the concept of revolution all social and temporal determinacy, robbing it, in particular, of its temporal specificity as a punctual event. 'The vocation of a socialist revolution,' Anderson concludes

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\* An earlier version of this essay was presented to a symposium on 'Postmodernism and the Re-reading of Modernity' at the University of Essex in July 1990. A slightly different version will appear along with other contributions to the symposium in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iverson, eds., *Postmodernism and the Re-reading of Modernity*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1992. My title, 'Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category', is taken from Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, London 1978, p. 218.

<sup>1</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, London 1983; Perry Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', *NLR* 144, March–April 1984, pp. 96–113. See also Berman's reply to Anderson, 'The Signs in the Street: a Response to Perry Anderson', *NLR* 144, March–April 1984, pp. 114–123.

with characteristic flourish, 'would be neither to prolong nor to fulfil modernity, but to abolish it.'<sup>2</sup> What are we to make of this critique? And how does it relate to the fundamental issue of what 'modernity' is (supposed to be)?

The first point to note about Anderson's critique is its oscillation between two quite different senses of 'modernity': (1) as a flawed and misleading category for the identification and analysis of historical processes which are better understood in quite other terms; and (2) as the legitimate designation for a historical phenomenon, the theoretical comprehension but not the identification of which is contested. The difference is difficult, but crucial. Anderson equivocates. He seems, in general, to adopt the first sense: he offers a Marxist critique of the discourse of 'modernity'. Yet his conclusion emphatically presumes the second: modernity is a historical reality, capable of 'prolongation', 'fulfilment' and 'abolition'. The connection resides in the reflexivity of historical experience itself: 'modernity' has a reality as a form of cultural self-consciousness, a lived experience of historical time, which cannot be denied, however one-sided it might be as a category of historical understanding. It is the texture of this reality of cultural form that Berman sets out to re-create in the name of its admittedly contradictory emancipatory potential. For Berman, in other words, modernity is in some quite basic sense a historical given. For Anderson, on the other hand, whilst it might be given as art ideological form (a mode of experience produced and reproduced by the rhythm of the capitalist market), it is 'given' in this specific, restricted and ultimately derogatory sense only. It is a misrepresentation, a form of misrecognition. We are thus offered in its place an alternative, Marxist account of historical development, based on a periodization of modes of production, the rise and decline of classes, and 'a complex and differential temporality, in which episodes or eras [are] discontinuous with each other, and heterogeneous within themselves'.<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, a problem with this opposition of modernity to modes of production: namely, that it is precisely the latter idea of a *differential* temporality which is associated, classically, with the idea of modernity itself. The question thus arises as to whether Anderson has not simply seized on a deficiency in Berman's presentation of the concept of modernity (its reduction to a celebratory 'dialectic of modernization and modernism') rather than, as he supposes, on a fundamental problem with the category itself, which he wants to replace, or at the very least decode, with conjunctural analyses of the cultural consequences of capitalist development—conjunctural analyses which, in their privileging of the moment of the present, appear to be a modification of the temporal problematic of 'modernity' itself. The problem derives from the absence in both Berman's and Anderson's accounts of an independent treatment of the logic of 'modernity' as a category of historical periodization.

In the introduction to Berman's book, modernity is periodized into

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

three fairly conventional phases: 1500–1789, 1789–1900 and 1900 onwards (early, classical and late?). But there is no consideration of the way in which the idea of modernity itself marks a new mode of historical periodization; no consideration of the relation between the kind of historical time occupied by modernity as an *epochal* category and that which is internal to modernity itself and registered by Berman in terms of the temporal logic of *modernism*—that ‘amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernisation’.<sup>4</sup> To this extent, Berman remains within the tradition of an unreflexive sociology of modernity wherein the attempt to establish what is new about ‘modern’ societies fails to reflect upon the temporal coordinates and conceptual implications of this form of investigation itself.<sup>5</sup> For there is something decidedly new about ‘modernity’ as a category of historical periodization: namely, that unlike other forms of epochal periodization (mythic, Christian or dynastic, for example) it is defined solely in terms of temporal determinants, and temporal determinants of a very specific kind. It is the failure to recognize the logic of these determinants that underlies naive conceptions of ‘postmodernity’ as a new historical epoch which succeeds modernity in historical time just as modernity itself succeeded the ‘Middle’ Ages.

In order to grasp this particular temporal logic, it is useful to look at Koselleck’s reconstruction of the semantic prehistory of ‘*Neuzeit*’ (literally, ‘new time’), a German term for modernity found in its composite form only after 1870, in his article ‘“*Neuzeit*”: Remarks on the Semantics of the Modern Concept of Movement’—leaving aside, for the time being, the problem of the differential register of the new temporal logic within different European languages.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Berman, *All That is Solid*, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> The self-fulfilling character of theories of modernism which remain unreflexively bound to the perspective of their objects is a preoccupation of Raymond Williams’s late work on modernism (Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, edited by Tony Pinkney, London 1989, chs 1 and 2). But the problem is equally, if not more acute in sociological theories of modernity. ‘Modernity’ is not just the privileged object of classical sociological theory; it constituted its standpoint as an academic discipline at the time of its foundation in the closing decades of the nineteenth century (David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*, Cambridge 1985, p. 2).

<sup>6</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, Cambridge, Mass. 1985, pp. 231–66. For a more wide-ranging survey of the semantic prehistory of ‘modernity’, see Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham, NC 1987, pp. 11–92. The differential register of the new historical time within different European languages is bound up with the different forms and rates of economic and political development in European nation-states. However, this complexity, internal to European development, must be distinguished in principle from differences in the meaning of the ‘modern’ in other, non-‘Western’ cultures, produced by their exposure to European ideas and social forms in the context of colonial and post-colonial relations of military and economic domination. Modernity is a Western idea. Whether it can any longer be thought of as an ‘exclusively Western concept’ (Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire*, trans. Rachel Phillips, Cambridge, Mass. 1974, p. 23), however, is doubtful. As Sakai reminds us (Naoki Sakai, ‘Modernity and its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism’, in Miyoshi, Masao and Harootunian, H.D., eds., *Postmodernism and Japan*, Durham, NC 1989, p. 94): ‘[T]here is no inherent reason why the West/non-West opposition

## From *Neue Zeit* to *Neuzeit*: Koselleck's Historical Semantics

The distinctive characteristic of '*Neuzeit*' as an epochal term, Koselleck argues, is that—like '*der Moderne*', '*les temps modernes*' or 'the modern age', which register the 'presentness' of an epoch to the time of its classification, but even more explicitly—it 'refers only to time, characterizing it as new, without, however, providing any indication of the historical content of this time or even its nature as a period'.<sup>7</sup> The conditions for such an abstract sense of the historical meaning of the present appear to have developed in five successive stages:

1. The consciousness of a new age which developed in Europe in the course of the fifteenth century was initially registered in two ways: by the emergence of the terms 'Renaissance' and 'Reformation' for ideas denoting the threshold of a new (unnamed) period; and by the designation of the preceding epoch, subsequent to Antiquity but now definitively over, as the 'Middle' Ages (*Mittelalter*).

2. In the second stage, which runs roughly from the sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century, the threshold concepts of 'Renaissance' and 'Reformation', through which the consciousness of a new age was initially registered, were transformed into ideas descriptive of now completed historical periods. This called for a term which denoted the new period as a whole that followed the Middle Ages. It is at this point that the phrase *neue Zeit* comes into use—although at first only in a neutral, chronological sense—signifying that the times are 'new' by contrast with the Middle Ages or *mittlere Zeiten*. There is, however, no specification of a criterion of newness. *Neue Zeit* is thus not, at this stage, a category of historical periodization in any substantive sense. Rather, it stands in for the absence of one, along with the term *modernus*, meaning (as it still does) 'of today', as opposed to 'of yesterday'—what is over, finished or historically surpassed. (This is, of course, the period of the famous Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, or the 'Battle of the Books' as it came to be known. If the Renaissance may be characterized by the replacement of the authority of the Church by that of the Ancients, it is this latter form of authority that now in turn becomes the object of attack.)

3. It is during the third phase, the Enlightenment, that the initially neutral phrase *neue Zeit* comes to acquire the sense of a qualitative claim about the newness of the times, in the sense of their being 'completely other, even better than what has gone before'.<sup>8</sup> The condition

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<sup>6</sup> (*cont.*)

should determine the geographic perspective of modernity except for the fact that it definitely serves to establish the unity of the West, a nebulous but commanding positivity whose existence we have tended to take for granted for so long.' If, as Sakai suggests, 'the West' is not so much a geographical category as a geopolitical one, whereby the historical predicate of modernity is translated into a geographical one, and vice versa, then we must accept that as 'the historico-geopolitical pairing of the premodern and the modern' becomes increasingly problematic, new configurations of 'modernity' will be uncovered in non-'Western' places. This is well illustrated by the case of Japan (Sakai's own example), but the point may be generalized.

<sup>7</sup> Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 233.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

for this transformation of the sense of the relationship of the present (and its immediate past) to the more distant past—from being a simple addition in a linear sequence of chronological time to a *qualitative transcendence* of the past of an epochal type which is more than the mere rebirth of a more ancient spirit—was a reorientation towards the future. This reorientation could only take place once Christian eschatology had shed its constant expectation of the imminent arrival of doomsday, and the advance of the sciences and the growing consciousness of the ‘New World’ and its peoples had opened up new horizons of expectation. Only at this point was a conceptual space available for an abstract temporality of qualitative newness that could be of epochal significance, because it could now be extrapolated into an otherwise empty future, without end, and hence without limit. ‘Modernity’, in the subsequently consolidated sense of *Neuzeit*, may in this respect be understood as the term for a *historical sublime*—a point of some interest in relation to recent purportedly ‘postmodern’ attempts to reappropriate the concept of the sublime.<sup>9</sup>

4. These developments culminate at the end of the eighteenth century, within the context of the acceleration of historical experience precipitated by the Industrial and French Revolutions, in the consolidation of the emergent semantic potential of *neue Zeit* in the coinage ‘*neueste Zeit*’: a phrase that definitively separates the qualitative dimension of the idea from its continuing more ‘neutral’ usage. As Koselleck puts it: ‘What could not be achieved in the concept of *neue Zeit* [because of the ambiguity produced by its continued neutral usage] was effected by *neueste Zeit*. It became a concept for the contemporary epoch opening up a new period [which] did not simply retrospectively register a past epoch.’<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the decades around 1800, ‘revolution’, ‘progress’, ‘development’, ‘crisis’, ‘*Zeitgeist*’, ‘epoch’, and ‘history’ itself, all acquire temporal determinations never present before:

Time is no longer the medium in which all histories take place; it gains an historical quality . . . history no longer occurs in, but through, time. Time

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<sup>9</sup> The avant-gardist task, Lyotard writes, is that of ‘undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time. The sublime feeling is the name of this privation’ (‘The Sublime and the Avant-Garde’, in *The Lyotard Reader*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, Oxford 1989, p. 211). See also Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime’, *Artforum*, vol. xx, no. 8, 1982. It is in his treatment of the Kantian concept of the sublime that Lyotard’s view of the postmodern as a ruptural modification of the modern stands out most clearly. Thus, he argues that whilst ‘modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime’, it is a ‘nostalgic’ one, since it ‘allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents’. The postmodern, on the other hand, is understood as ‘that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself’. As such, it is understood to impart ‘a stronger sense of the unpresentable’ (‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?’, trans. Régis Durand, published as the appendix to *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester 1984, p. 81). Philosophically, the continuity here between the modern and postmodern would seem to be at least as strong as the difference. For a critique of Lyotard’s sublime that stresses the conservatism of this connection, see Meaghan Morris, ‘Postmodernity and Lyotard’s Sublime’, in *The Pirate’s Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism*, London 1988, pp. 213–39.

<sup>10</sup> Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 249.

becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right. Presupposed by this formulation of experience is a concept of history which is likewise new: the collective singular form of *Geschichte*, which since around 1780 can be conceived as history in and for itself in the absence of an associated subject or object.<sup>11</sup>

It is because of the qualitative transformation at this time in the temporal matrix of historical terms that ‘modernity’, in the full sense of the term, is generally taken to begin here.

5. It is this full sense of a ‘newest time’ (*neueste Zeit*), opening up a new period by virtue of the quality of the temporality it involves, that was condensed and generalized in the latter half of the nineteenth century into the ideas of *Neuzeit* and *modernité*, thereby coming to be understood as constitutive of the temporality of modernity as such. It is this, the temporality of Baudelaire’s and Flaubert’s, Simmel’s and Benjamin’s, late-nineteenth-century modernity, the historical force of whose fundamental objects ‘lies *solely* in the fact that they are new’,<sup>12</sup> which has been the focus of recent attention directed towards modernity as an aesthetic concept and, more broadly, as a form of social experience. The logic of the new, fashion, and aesthetic modernism as a ‘rebellion against the modernity of the philistine’<sup>13</sup> which nonetheless works within the same temporal structure, may all be understood as the result of an aestheticization of ‘modernity’ as a form of historical consciousness and its transformation into a general model of social experience. It is in the course of this generalization of an epochal form of historical consciousness into the temporal form of experience itself that the dialectical character of the new as the ‘ever-same’, articulated philosophically in Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence, and deciphered economically in Marx’s analysis of the logic of commodity production, is revealed for the first time.<sup>14</sup>

Finally and more tentatively, to take us up to the present, we might complete Koselleck’s account by adding a sixth stage, in which the peculiar and paradoxical abstractness of the temporality of the new is at once problematized and affirmed. This is the stage after the Second World War during which, as Raymond Williams has put it, “modern” shifts its reference from “now” to “just now” or even “then”, and for some time has been a designation always going into the past with which [in English] “contemporary” may be contrasted

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 246. See also Blumenberg, ‘The Epochs of the Concept of an Epoch’, in Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace, Cambridge, Mass. 1983, pp. 457–82.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 1, 3, Frankfurt 1980, p. 1152; quoted in translation in Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces*, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> The ‘ever-always-the-same,’ Benjamin writes, ‘appears palpably in mass-production for the first time’, while ‘the idea of the eternal recurrence transforms historical events into mass-produced articles’ (Walter Benjamin, ‘Central Park’, trans. Lloyd Spencer, *New German Critique* 34, Winter 1985, pp. 48, 36). It is Benjamin’s linkage of Marx’s analysis of commodity production to Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence, as the basis for his reading of Baudelaire and, through him, the city of Paris as the ‘Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, that gives his account of modernity as a form of experience its unsurpassed combination of philosophical depth and cultural breadth.

for its presentness.<sup>15</sup> 'Modernity', fixed now as a discrete historical period within its own temporal scheme, as the golden age of its cultural self-consciousness, hardens into a mere *name* and is left stranded in the past. The Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns is replaced by a Quarrel between the Moderns and Contemporaries.<sup>16</sup> 'All that is left to us is to become post-moderns.'<sup>17</sup> To become post-modern, however, in this sense at least, is simply to *remain* modern, to keep in step, a companion of the times (*Zeitgenössisch*), to be con-temporary. 'What, then, is the postmodern?' Lyotard asks. '[U]ndoubtedly part of the modern. A work can only be modern if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism . . . is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.'<sup>18</sup> It is in the irreducible doubling of a reflexive concept of modernity as something that has happened, yet continues to happen—ever new but always, in its newness, the same—that the identity and difference of the 'modern' and the 'postmodern' plays itself out at the level of time. What remains to be determined is whether anything further can be extracted from this analysis by way of a concrete account of the character of recent historical changes.<sup>19</sup>

Koselleck's semantic prehistory of *Neuzeit* shows us the lived time-consciousness of late-nineteenth-century European metropolitan modernity—that 'transitoriness' at the core of the 'fugitive' and the 'contingent'<sup>20</sup>—as an intensified social embodiment of a historiographic consciousness that had been developing in Europe for some considerable time. On reflection, this is not surprising, since each seems to have its origin in a common source: the temporality of capital accumulation and of its social and political consequences in the formation of capitalist societies. (The latter, it should be noted, can in no way be reduced to the former.) Nonetheless, an awareness of this fact can help us to distance ourselves from the apparent immediacy of the form as an all-engulfing structure of social consciousness, in order to examine it in its own right, freed from the polemical inflections it

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<sup>15</sup> Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces*, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> The term 'postmodernism' first appears in the 1930s in discussions of Latin American poetry (*postmodernismo*), but its meaning there lacks the current epochal dimension. An often cited early occurrence of the latter sense is in the 1947 edition of Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*. The term first began to gain a general currency in American literary theory in the early 1960s, particularly through the work of Leslie Fielder. It was only in the 1970s and early 1980s, however, that it gradually came to acquire the prominence which was the basis for its more recent wholesale circulation as a general label for the character of the times. Central to this process of popularization were Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, London 1977; Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, originally published in French in 1979; and Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *NLR* 146, July–August 1984, pp. 53–92. For a discussion of the history of the term, see Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, Indiana 1987, pp. 84–96. The recent attempt to trump the postmodern with the idea of the 'post-contemporary' (as in the series of 'Post-Contemporary Interventions' edited by Stanley Fish and Fredric Jaeson at Duke University Press) would seem to be yet another, if more desperate, version of the same self-defeating temporal logic.

<sup>20</sup> Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863), in Charles Baudelaire, *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings*, London 1986, p. 37, translation altered.

acquires in its more familiar affirmative cultural manifestations (modernism). It then becomes possible to see Anderson's alternative analytical frame of a 'complex and differential temporality' leading to strictly 'conjunctural' analyses—derived, it seems, from Althusser's 'Outline for a Concept of Historical Time'<sup>21</sup>—as a variation on the very temporal paradigm it sets out to oppose.

### The Quality of Modernity: Homogenization, Differentiation and Abstraction

'Modernity', then, plays a peculiar dual role as a category of historical periodization: it designates the contemporaneity of an epoch to the time of its classification, but it registers this contemporaneity in terms of a qualitatively new, self-transcending temporality, which has the simultaneous effect of distancing the present from even that most recent past with which it is thus identified. It is this paradoxical doubling or inherently dialectical quality that makes 'modernity' both so irresistible and so problematic a category. It is achieved through the abstraction of the logical structure of the process of change from its concrete historical determinants—an abstraction which parallels that at work in the development of money as a store of value (abstract labour-time).<sup>22</sup> The temporal matrix thus produced has three main characteristics:

1. Exclusive *valorization of the historical* (as opposed to the merely chronological) *present over the past*, as its negation and transcendence, and as the standpoint from which to periodize and understand history as a whole. (History, as Koselleck puts it, is 'temporalized'. It becomes possible for an event to change its identity according to its shifting status in the advance of history as a whole.<sup>23</sup>)
2. *Openness towards an indeterminate future* characterized only by its prospective transcendence of the historical present and its relegation of this present to a future past.
3. A tendential *elimination of the historical present itself* as the vanishing point of a perpetual transition between a constantly changing past and an as yet indeterminate future. Or, to put it another way: the present as the identity of duration and eternity; that 'now' which is not so much a gap in time as a 'gap of time.'<sup>24</sup> (The dialectic of the new, Adorno points out, represses duration in so far as 'the new is an invariant: the *desire* for the new'.<sup>25</sup>)

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<sup>21</sup> Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster, London 1979, pt II, ch. 4.

<sup>22</sup> For an account of money as the 'first form of appearance of capital' (self-expanding value), see Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, London 1954, pp. 97–172. The major work of Georg Simmel, the first sociologist of 'modernity', was of course *The Philosophy of Money* (trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, edited by David Frisby, London 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 250.

<sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Harmondsworth 1977, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, London 1984, p. 41. Cf. Benjamin's definition of fashion as 'the eternal recurrence of the new'. 'Central Park', p. 46.

Anderson's objections to Berman's affirmation of this temporal structure centre on its homogenizing tendencies and, in particular, the 'fundamentally *planar*' conception of development as 'modernization' to which it gives rise: 'a continuous-flow process in which there is no real differentiation of one conjuncture or epoch from another save in terms of the mere chronological succession of old and new, earlier and later, categories themselves subject to unceasing permutations of positions in one direction, as time goes by and the later becomes earlier, the newer older.'<sup>26</sup> Anderson is right, I think, to worry about this homogenizing tendency; right, too, to be sceptical about the political potential attributed to it by Berman for establishing new forms of collectivity out of the common structure of experiences of disintegration and renewal—although he undoubtedly underestimates its significance in this regard. But he is wrong to understand the idea of modernity *purely* in terms of the homogenization of historical time; an error that is compounded when he goes on to identify this homogenization with 'the mere *chronological* succession of old and new'.

A number of problems arise here. The first concerns the differential temporality introduced by the category of 'modernity', by virtue of the distinction it involves between modern and earlier 'times', and its negation by the idea of modernization. Secondly, there is the differential character of the temporality internal to modernity itself, which is established by its qualitative distinction between chronological and historical time: the 'next' is *not* necessarily the 'new'; or at least, the 'next as new' is never simply the chronologically next (by what scale—seconds, hours, days, months, years?). Thirdly, and associated with this, is the problem of the abstractness of the new, the way it is dealt with by empirical theories of modernity, and the consequent idea of modernity as a project. Finally, there is the question of the form of temporality at work in conjunctural analyses, and the hope held out by Anderson of thereby escaping the temporal structure of 'modernity'. The problem posed by an insufficiently differentiated concept of modernization, it will be argued here, cannot be reduced to a simple opposition of 'homogeneous' to 'differential' historical time. Rather, it concerns the possibilities and pitfalls built into the dialectics of homogenization and differentiation constitutive of the temporality of 'modernity', and the way in which these are tied up, inextricably, with its *spatial* relations.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', p. 101.

<sup>27</sup> It has become commonplace to assume that whilst modernity is about new forms of experience of time, it is 'postmodernity' that marks a revolution in spatial relations. But this is too simple: the two dimensions are inextricably bound together. Changes in the experience of space always also involve changes in the experience of time, and vice versa. Spatial relations have tended to be neglected in discourses on 'modernity' and are now increasingly the object of investigation (see for example, Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London 1989; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford 1989, pp. 201–323), but that is a different matter. In fact, as Benjamin points out, the shift from a Christian eschatological concept of historical time to a 'modern' one 'secularized time into space' (Walter Benjamin, 'N [Re] The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress'—Konvolut N from the 'Notes and Materials' that make up the *Arcades Project*—trans. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth, in Gary Smith, ed., *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, Chicago 1989, p. 62). It is in the repressed

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that in so far as 'modernity' as a periodizing category is understood in the full sense of registering a break not only from one chronologically defined period to another, but in the quality of historical time itself, it sets up a differential between the character of its own time and that which precedes it. This differential forms the basis for the transformation, in the late eighteenth century, in the meaning of the concepts of 'progress' and 'development', that makes them the precursors of later, twentieth-century concepts of modernization. For it is the idea which thus develops, of the *non-contemporaneity* of *geographically diverse* but *chronologically simultaneous* times, that, in the context of colonial experience, becomes the basis for 'universal histories with a cosmopolitan intent'. Once the use of such comparisons was established in colonial discourse, they were readily transferred to the relations between particular social spheres and practices within different European countries themselves, and thereafter, once again, globally, in an expanding dialectic of differentiation and homogenization.

Such histories are 'modernizing' in the sense that the results of synchronic comparisons are ordered diachronically to produce a scale of development that defines 'progress' in terms of the projection of certain people's presents as other people's futures. As such, they are indeed homogenizing. But this homogenization is premised upon a differentiation that must first be recognized in order to be negated. Furthermore, for this negation to occur and homogenization to be achieved, some specific criterion must be introduced to set up a new differential, within the newly homogenized time, in order to provide a content for the concept of 'progress'. Thus, when Anderson argues that the temporality of modernity 'knows' no internal principle of variation, he is only partly right—to the extent that the concept of modernity, in its basic theoretical form, itself furnishes no such principle. He is wrong, however, in so far as it *requires* one, in order that there be some way to identify the historically, as opposed to the merely chronologically, 'new'. This is the role of so-called 'theories of modernity' (in distinction from the more general theorization of 'modernity' of the kind that I have sketched): to provide a content to fill the form of the modern; to give it something more than an abstract temporal determinacy. It is at this point, historically, that the *geopolitical* dimension of the concept comes into its own, providing, via the discourses of colonialism, a series of criteria of 'progress' derived, first, from the history of European nation-states, and later, in modernization theory proper, from America.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> (*cont.*)

spatial premisses of the concept of modernity that its political logic is to be found. As Sakai puts it: 'The condition for the possibility of conceiving of history as a linear and evolutionary series of incidents lay in its . . . relation to other histories, other *coexisting* temporalities.' What this means is that 'the significance of modernity for the non-West [will] never be grasped unless it is apprehended in the non-West's [changing] spatial relationship to the West' (Sakai, 'Modernity and its Critique', pp. 106, 114). Hence the centrality of migration and the new international division of labour to an understanding of the new configurations of the 'modern'.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of theories of development, see Jorge Larrain, *Theories of Development: Capitalism, Colonialism and Dependency*, Cambridge 1989, especially the historical map on p. 4. The critique of the concept of modernization provides the starting point

The problem with Anderson's reading may be illustrated with reference to his complaint that the temporality of modernity cannot accommodate the idea of decline.<sup>29</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, one might say that in its perpetual anxiety to transcend the present, modernity is everywhere haunted by the idea of decline. Anderson's account suppresses this increasingly palpable cultural anxiety because it identifies the self-transcending temporality of modernity with the blank homogeneity of chronology, on the basis of their common abstraction of purely temporal indices of periodization.

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<sup>28</sup> (cont.)

for that understanding of postmodernism which centres upon the construction (and deconstruction) of the idea of colonial discourse. Thus Young, for example, argues *contra* Jameson that it is 'not just the cultural effects of a new stage of "late" capitalism' that the concept of postmodernism is best thought to mark, but 'European culture's awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world' (Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, London 1990, pp. 19–20). The value of poststructuralism as a theoretical approach to this problem, he continues, is that unlike the idea of postmodernism 'it does not offer a *critique* by positioning itself outside "the West", but rather uses its own alterity and duplicity in order to effect its deconstruction.' My own approach, in line with the logic of Sakai's argument, accepts this point about immanence, with one important modification: namely, that since the idea of 'the West' can no longer be understood simply geographically—even, or especially, in its intrusion, as a structuring element, into its 'non-Western' other—but must embrace new forms found *only* within this non-Western other, reflection upon it need not restrict itself to the pure (post-critical) negativity of deconstructive techniques, but may also serve as the occasion for the development of new forms of *dialectical* thought, grounded in the immanent development of modernity itself. In this respect, the debate about postmodernism does not just provide the occasion for a 're-reading' of modernity; rather, such a re-reading should be understood as the essential content of the debate.

Parallel to the problem of the way in which the spatial relations of 'modernity' intrinsic to the colonial character of its Western origins produce definite political effects of their own, is the question of the *gendering* of 'modernity' as a form of historical time. Kristeva has argued that 'for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilisations', in opposition to the linear temporality of a history from which women have been both symbolically and materially excluded (Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi, Oxford 1986, p. 191). She then points out that different generations within feminism have challenged this opposition in different ways, whilst another has affirmed it. Despite her desire to recover the differences beneath 'the apparent coherence which the term "woman" assumes in contemporary ideology', however, she nonetheless continues to use the term in such a way as to sustain its traditional symbolic unity. The problem with this strategy is that it is unable to register the disruptive *symbolic* significance of her 'first generation' feminism's demands for access to the 'men's time' of modernity (history). The success of such demands can thus only be thought in terms of the 'parallel existence' or 'interweaving' of different (already established) times within women's experience, rather than as a genuinely transformative moment that would leave neither women's time nor historical time (neither 'women' nor 'history') unchanged. In opposing women's time to historical time, Kristeva explicitly associates the former with space, thereby not only restricting the notion of 'historical' time to a single highly specific form (linear time), but also uncritically reproducing the simple opposition of historical time to space noted above. This is not to suggest that the temporality of 'modernity' is ungendered, but only that Kristeva's pioneering essay remains both too schematic and too closely tied to traditional symbolic forms of gender representation to go beyond an initial identification of the problem.

<sup>29</sup> Anderson, 'Modernity and Revolution', pp. 101–3.

But whilst the two are thus connected, they cannot, in principle, be thought of as the *same*. Chronology alone could never be the measure of *historical* progress. Modernization theory, notoriously, finds its content in a combination of quasi-spatial (geopolitical) and economic criteria. But the idea of decline is no less applicable to the system as a whole. Just as the homogeneity of modernization theory's measures of progress/decline depends upon differentials which it then reduces to differences within a single scale, so the possibility of an 'absolute' decline derives from modernity's continual projection of a differential into the future, which would not, in this case, be redeemed. ('Absolute' decline, in other words, is temporally relative.) The temporal structure of 'modernity' dictates that any particular modernity constantly re-establish itself in relation to an ever-expanding past. That the concept of modernity itself, in its most general form as a kind of historical time, involves only an abstract sense of what such a re-establishment entails (the 'new'), is no reason to deny its reality. Rather, it is the conceptual shape to which all 'modern' theories of decline must conform, like the theories of progress they mirror.<sup>30</sup>

This is the problem that all 'theories' of modernity must face: modernities, in any substantive sociohistorical sense, *grow old*. It is to deal with this problem that, in strict accordance with the temporal logic of modernity, the idea of the 'postmodern' has appeared, along with (at least in its more sophisticated versions) its own distinctive temporal paradoxes. Naïve conceptions of postmodernity, one might say, register an affirmative self-consciousness of the paradoxes and aporias of 'modernity' but fail to recognize the fact—a truly Nietzschean form of historical knowledge based on a wilful, active forgetting. Fully reflexive conceptions of postmodernity, on the other hand, take us back into the paradoxes and aporias of 'modernity' at a higher conceptual level. Alternatively, substantive theories of modernity can hold their ground, set themselves against the erosion of their historical premises, and turn themselves into *projects*.

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<sup>30</sup> My objections to Anderson here are not objections to his critique of Berman, so much as objections to his *acceptance* of Berman's reduction of 'modernity' to a dialectic of modernism and modernization. By accepting Berman's account of modernity, Anderson unwittingly becomes complicit in the object of his own critique. His real complaint is against the *modernism* of Berman's version of modernization: his affirmation of the temporal logic of 'modernity' in abstraction from its underlying social dynamics. When he goes on to extend this critique to modernism proper (modernism as an artistic category), however, Anderson is less persuasive. Modernism is indeed a 'perennial' concept. That is its point. In its deepest and most theoretically productive sense, it is neither a merely stylistic nor a 'movement' concept (part of an empiricist art history), but a term identifying the immanent historical logic of a particular dynamic of artistic development. It provides a temporal frame for the historical interpretation of works, not that interpretation itself. (For an outline of such a conception of modernism, in the form of a reading of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, see Peter Osborne, 'Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism: The Problem of a "Postmodern" Art', in Andrew Benjamin, ed., *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, London 1989, pp. 23–48.) It was Benjamin who took as his explicit goal the construction of a form of historical experience 'beyond' the categories of progress and decline ('N [Re the Theory of Knowledge]', pp. 44, 48). In so doing, however, he was explicitly opposing himself to precisely that homogeneous continuum of modern time consciousness which Anderson accuses of *lacking* a concept of decline.

## Modernity as Project: Habermas, Foucault and the History of Enlightenment

It was noted above that the concept of modernity was first universalized through the spatialization of its founding temporal difference, under colonialism; thereafter, the differential between itself and other 'times' was reduced to a difference within a single temporal scale of 'progress', 'modernization' and 'development'. This process was accompanied at a theoretical level by the appearance of a new kind of universalizing discourse about the present: what Habermas has called the '*philosophical discourse of modernity*'.<sup>31</sup> If it has been the function of regional theories of modernity (economic, political, religious, aesthetic, sociological, and so forth) to totalize spatially across their respective domains, on the basis of specific, geopolitically determined but empirically derived criteria of the 'modern', then the task of the philosophical discourse of modernity has been to unify and legitimate these enquiries within the scope of a single *practical* definition of the modern. The question thus arises as to how this discourse has fared in the face of the inevitable but paradoxical ageing of all substantive concepts of 'modernity'. The debate hinges on the fate of the concept of Enlightenment, or more specifically, the Enlightenment concept of an autonomous reason. For it is through this idea that modernity first came to be conceived philosophically, not just as a new historical period or a new form of historical time, but, more substantively, as a world-historical project. The space within the temporality of 'modernity' for alternative orientations to this project may be illustrated by the difference between Habermas and Foucault over the heritage of Kant's 1784 essay, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?'.<sup>32</sup>

Habermas and Foucault are agreed on three main points about Kant's essay:

1. It inaugurates a philosophical discourse *on* modernity—a discourse that, for the first time, takes the character of the present in its

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<sup>31</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, Mass. 1987. See also Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity—an Incomplete Project', trans. Seyla Benhabib, in Hal Foster, ed., *Postmodern Culture*, London 1985, pp. 3–15.

<sup>32</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', in I. Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey, Indianapolis 1983, pp. 41–8; Michel Foucault, 'Georges Canguilhem: Philosopher of Error', trans. Graham Burchell, *Ideology and Consciousness* 7, Autumn 1980, pp. 51–62; 'Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution', trans. Colin Gordon, *Economy and Society*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 88–96; 'What is Enlightenment?', trans. Catherine Porter, in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, Harmondsworth 1986, pp. 32–50; Jürgen Habermas, 'Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present: On Foucault's Lecture on Kant's *What is Enlightenment?*', in J. Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians Debate*, edited and translated by Shierry Weber Nicholson, Cambridge 1989, ch. 7. For an example of the way in which this dispute has been taken up by a younger generation of academics in America, see the exchange between Rajchman and Wolin: John Rajchman, 'Habermas's Complaint', *New German Critique* 45, Fall 1988, pp. 163–91; Richard Wolin, 'On Misunderstanding Habermas: A Response to Rajchman', *New German Critique* 49, Winter 1990, pp. 139–54; John Rajchman, 'Rejoinder to Richard Wolin', *New German Critique* 49, Winter 1990, pp. 155–61.

‘present-ness’ as the specific object of philosophical thought, within the horizons of a conception of history that is free from both backward-looking comparisons with the ancients and forward-looking expectations about doomsday.<sup>33</sup>

2. It inaugurates a philosophical discourse of modernity, in so far as its conception of the autonomy of reason is internal to the time-consciousness of a self-transcending present which cuts itself off, in principle, from the determinations of the past. Reason, for Kant, must be able to validate its own laws to itself, within the present, without reference to history or tradition. As Habermas puts it: modernity ‘has to create its normativity out of itself’, through reflection.<sup>34</sup> Hence Kant’s famous motto of Enlightenment—‘*Sapere Aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding’—and his definition of Enlightenment as ‘humanity’s emergence from its self-imposed immaturity’, where immaturity is understood as ‘the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another.’<sup>35</sup> Modernity is in this respect an *infinite* task.

3. The subsequent history of ‘Enlightenment’ in the practices of European nation-states has involved forms of domination, as well as freedom, which, furthermore, are connected to the internal contradictions of the original Enlightenment concept of autonomous reason itself. (Foucault refers to the areas of scientific and technical rationality, the fate of revolutions, and colonialism. Habermas is concerned with the social application of instrumental and functionalist forms of reason, but has yet to address himself to the problems of colonial and post-colonial forms of domination.<sup>36</sup>)

Where Habermas and Foucault differ, quite radically, is in their respective analysis of the character and depth of the problem posed by these phenomena for the idea of Enlightenment, and its relationship to the historical present. This difference may be summed up as follows. Whilst Habermas wants to ‘complete’ the concept of Enlightenment by reworking its universalistic doctrine of autonomous rational individuality and free public reason in order to avoid its repressive implications (by replacing a subject-centred with an intersubjective or communicative concept of reason), Foucault remains wedded to it only in the much broader sense of what he calls its ‘philosophical *ethos*’

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<sup>33</sup> In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (originally written as lectures delivered in 1983–84), it is initially Hegel who is credited with being ‘the first to raise to the level of a philosophical problem the process of detaching modernity from the suggestion of norms lying outside of itself in the past’ (p. 16). Later in the same volume, however, (p. 295) following the remarks in his 1984 memorial address for Foucault, (‘Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present’), Habermas concedes Foucault’s identification of Kant as the initiator of the discourse. The absence of a discussion of Kant in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, where there is no reference to Kant’s essay, despite the fact that it is essentially Kant’s project that Habermas is defending, is unfortunate.

<sup>34</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’, p. 41.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, ‘Georges Canguilhem’, p. 54; Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume I: *Reason and the Rationalisation of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, London 1985; Volume II: *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Cambridge 1987. See also Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, London 1979.

—namely, the attitude of ‘a permanent critique of our historical era’.<sup>37</sup> Such an attitude, Foucault argues, demands a critique of the Enlightenment as historical event which transcends the original Enlightenment model of critique:

Two centuries later, the Enlightenment returns: but now not at all as a way for the West to take cognisance of its present possibilities and of the liberties to which it can accede, but as a way of interrogating it on its limits and the powers which it has abused. *Reason as despotic Enlightenment*.<sup>38</sup>

Those ‘who wish us to preserve alive and intact the heritage of *Aufklärung*’, Foucault insists, engage in ‘the most touching of treasons’. For they suppress the very question of ‘the historicity of the thought of the universal.’<sup>39</sup> By hanging onto Enlightenment in this way, we might say, they betray its *modernity*. The very existence of the post-Nietzschean challenge to Enlightenment reason undermines the latter’s claim to modernity. Yet Habermas’s charge against Foucault is exactly the same. For if the temporality of ‘modernity’ as a self-transcending break with other times ties it, logically, to the ideal of rational autonomy, and Foucault’s historical challenge is a challenge to this idea, then surely Foucault is the ‘traitor’—purveyor of an ‘irrational’ anti-Enlightenment in the name of Enlightenment itself. Either way, it would seem, ‘anachronism becomes the refuge of modernity’.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, the issue cannot be settled at this level of analysis. The maintenance of a reflexive normativity can no more be reduced to the recovery of the ‘good’ side of Enlightenment reason from its alienated other, than their dialectical entanglement can be used to justify its rejection wholesale. Rather, what the dispute would seem to demonstrate (against both Habermas and Berman) is that ‘modernity’ is *not*, as such, a project. It is a form of historical consciousness, an abstract temporal structure which, in totalizing history from the standpoint of an ever-vanishing, ever-present present, embraces a conflicting plurality of projects, of possible futures, provided they conform to its basic logical structure. Which of these projects will turn out to have been *truly* modern, only time (historical time) will tell.

### Capitalism, Socialism, Modernity: Totalization and Conjunctural Analysis

Anderson’s error is to overstate the continuity of modern time consciousness, to reduce historical to chronological time, and (following Berman) to confuse the idea of modernity as a structure of historical

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<sup>37</sup> Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> Foucault, ‘Georges Canguilhem’, p. 54. Note: ‘Reason as despotic Enlightenment’; *not* ‘Enlightenment as despotic reason’—a formulation that would commit Foucault to the elaboration of an alternative model of practical reason. For critiques of Foucault along the lines that he is, in any case, so committed, but unable in principle to produce such an alternative, see Peter Dews, ‘Power and Subjectivity in Foucault’, *NLR* 144, March–April 1984, pp. 72–95; and Nancy Fraser, ‘Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions’, *Praxis International* 1, 1981. This is also Habermas’s line in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 266–93, where he accuses Foucault of ‘cryptonormativism’.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault, ‘Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution’, p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 221.

time with the logic of modernism as its affirmative cultural self-consciousness. What has yet to be determined is the relation of 'modernity' to the complex and differential temporality of conjunctural analysis, which Anderson recommends as its replacement. It is here that the limits of 'modernity', and thus the scope of its legitimate application, begin to come into view. At this point, it is useful to return to Althusser to examine the notion of conjunctural analysis at its source.

Althusser's goal was to determine the specificity of Marx's concept of history by differentiating it, in particular, from both the 'everyday' (empiricist) concept of history and the historical logic of Hegelianism. He sought to do this, in part, by 'constructing the *Marxist concept of historical time* on the basis of the Marxist conception of the social totality'. Different conceptions of the social whole, he argued, contain 'the secret of the conception of history in which the "development" of this social whole is thought'. He thus came to contrast the 'homogeneous continuity' and 'contemporaneity' of Hegelian time with the differential temporality of a Marxist conception of historical time on the basis of the difference between Hegel's 'expressive totality' and his own distinctive interpretation of the Marxist whole as a 'complex structural unity', the level or instances of which are 'articulated with one another according to specific determinations, fixed in the last instance by the level or instance of the economy'.<sup>41</sup> What is of particular interest in this analysis is its critique of the category of the 'historical present' as a critique of 'contemporaneity', and the costs it involves for thinking history as a whole.

According to Althusser, the problem with the category of the historical present is that in it 'the structure of historical existence is such that all the elements of the whole co-exist in one and the same time, one and the same present, and are therefore contemporaneous with one another in one and the same present'.<sup>42</sup> In the unity of the conjuncture, on the other hand, each level or instance of the whole has its own peculiar time 'relatively autonomous and hence relatively independent, even in its dependence, of the "times" of the other levels'. Each of these peculiar histories is 'punctuated with peculiar rhythms and can only be known on condition that we have defined the *concept* of the specificity of its historical temporality and its punctuations'. It is not enough, however, simply to think these various histories in their differences: 'we must also think these differences in rhythm and punctuation in their foundation, in the type of articulation, displacement and torsion which harmonises these different times with one another' in the unity of the whole.<sup>43</sup> It is at this point that things begin to get tricky. For since there is no 'essential' unity to the Althusserian totality there is no common time within which to think the articulated coexistence of its various constitutive temporalities. Taking an 'essential section' through the complex totality, in the form

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<sup>41</sup> Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 97. Cf. the important early essays, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination' and 'On the Materialist Dialectic', in Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, London 1969, pp. 87–128, 161–218.

<sup>42</sup> Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, p. 94.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

of a synchronic analysis, is no good because it reintroduces precisely that contemporaneity of a 'continuous-homogeneous time' which the idea of differential historical times was intended to abolish. All we can do, it seems, is think the whole from the standpoint of a variety of different *localized* presents, such that the times of other levels appear within such analyses only relationally, in the form of a series of 'absences'. The problem with this, however, is that while it may allow us to build up a conjunctural analysis of the whole out of a series of disjunctive analyses of its parts, each of which contains its own 'decentred' (negative) totalization from the standpoint of its specific locality, it rules out *in principle* any conception of the 'development' of the whole as a whole, whether at the level of the social formation, mode of production or of 'history' itself. The cost of Althusser's conjunctural form of differential temporality is thus the impossibility of thinking the transition from one mode of production to another: precisely that 'object' which it is the ultimate rationale of historical materialism to think—since, in the end, such transitions can be thought only as 'breaks' or 'ruptures' *between* different articulated sets of times. They have no time of their own.<sup>44</sup>

Althusser's analysis is doubly instructive. In the first place, it does indeed point to the limits of 'modernity' as a category of historical totalization, in so far as all such totalizations abstract from the concrete multiplicity of differential times coexisting in the 'now' a single differential (however internally complex) through which to mark the time of the present. This is an inevitable effect of all forms of totalization, the cost, in this case, of thinking 'history' as a whole: that very concept which, ironically, at the conclusion of his search for the specificity of Marx's concept of history, Althusser was unable to think at all. This is the second lesson of Althusser's work on historical time: a purely conjunctural sense of the 'articulation, displacement and torsion' of differential temporalities, for all its criticisms of 'synchrony', remains outside of historical time altogether. In its reduction of a totalizing present to the idea of the 'essential section', it exchanges the difficulties and possibilities of the 'now' for the no-time of a disembodied 'theory'.<sup>45</sup> As such, it requires, to give it practical

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<sup>44</sup> The inability of Althusser's Marxism to think historical change is notorious. It was the rock on which the whole project foundered. Ironically, it was precisely because of its supposed political value that Althusser focused on the notion of conjunctural analysis in the first place, which he derived from Lenin. His main objection to Hegelian time, apart from its incompatibility with certain features of Marxist analysis (a result, dare one say, of its *empirical* inadequacy), was that its ontologization of the present 'prevents any anticipation of historical time, any conscious anticipation of the future . . . any *knowledge of the future*'. Consequently, he argued, there can be for it no 'science of politics': 'no Hegelian politics is possible strictly speaking' (*Reading Capital*, p. 95; cf. *For Marx*, p. 204). In fact, of course, there are at least two types of Hegelian politics: the notorious 'left' and 'right' Hegelianisms.

<sup>45</sup> The knowledge of history, according to one of Althusser's more notorious formulations, 'is no more historical than the knowledge of sugar is sweet' (*Reading Capital*, p. 106). Yet surely, from a materialist standpoint, *all* knowledge is historical—including the knowledge of sugar! For an early attempt to think 'nonsynchronism' *within* historical time (in the context of an analysis of fascism), see Ernst Bloch, 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics', trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique* 11, Spring 1977, pp. 22–38. For the elaboration of the project of a critical mediation of Hegelian-

political significance, the restitution of a totalizing concept of historical time within which to move. But why try to totalize history if it will inevitably homogenize and repress, reduce or forget, certain differences? The short answer is: because, at one level at least, *history is already totalizing itself*.

We have seen how, through the spatial totalization of a Western 'modernity', the idea of modernity came to provide a standpoint for historical totalization. The mechanism here was European colonialism, but the world market that was thereby established during the late feudal period in Europe soon became the medium for the development of capitalism as a world system, once the resolution of the social struggles internal to late European feudalism had laid the basis for the development of capitalism in Europe.<sup>46</sup> World history, as Marx reminds us, 'has not always existed; history as world history [is] a result',<sup>47</sup> and it is a result, primarily, of capitalism. Capitalism universalizes history. Yet, as Vilar points out, 'it has not *unified* it'. This, he goes on, 'will be the task of another mode of production'.<sup>48</sup> Socialism as the unification of history: the idea has frightened a lot of people for whom totalization and totalitarianism are but different words for the same thing—although they have worried rather less about the totalizing capacities of capital. But there are many modes of totalization, both theoretical and practical, positive and negative, and it is here that the real debate begins.<sup>49</sup>

There is a general tendency to counterpose 'capitalism' and 'modernity' as alternative theoretical categories for the interpretation of the same object (Marxism versus Weberianism, for example). The issue is, however, primarily methodological, and just as there have been, and will doubtless continue to be, Weberian Marxisms (conscious or not), so what I am suggesting is that there may be Marxist accounts of

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<sup>45</sup> (*cont.*)

Marxist and structuralist theories of history in the form of a 'determinate negation of the structuralist negation of history', see Alfred Schmidt, *History and Structure: An Essay on Hegelian-Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History*, trans. Jeffrey Herf, Cambridge, Mass. 1981.

<sup>46</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Wheels of Commerce: Civilisation and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, Volume 2, trans. Sian Reynolds, London 1982; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, London 1974; T.H. Ashton and C.H.E. Philpin, *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, Cambridge 1985.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London 1973, p. 109.

<sup>48</sup> Pierre Vilar, 'Marxist History, A History in the Making: Towards a Dialogue with Althusser', *NLR* 80, July–August 1973, p. 105.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of the variety of concepts of totality within Marxism, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, Berkeley 1984. See also Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London 1981, pp. 17–102. For an overview of the continuation of this debate in the context of a post-colonial postmodernism, in the work of Said, Bhabha and Spivak, see Young, *White Mythologies*, pp. 119–75. The crux of the matter, I would suggest, lies in how, concretely, we are to interpret Adorno's maxim that 'universal history must be construed and denied' (Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, London 1973, p. 320).

'modernity' which do not reduce it to a merely ideological concept. Born, like capitalism, out of colonialism and the world market, 'modernity' as a structure of historical consciousness predates the development of capitalism proper. It operates at a different level of analysis from the concepts of Marxist political economy, and its shape changes with time. Nonetheless, as our primary secular category of historical totalization it is hard to see how we can do without it in one form or another. If 'all "new" history without totalising ambition will be a history old before its time',<sup>50</sup> we have no option but to rethink 'modernity' as the transformation of the conditions of its existence gathers pace with time.

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<sup>50</sup> Vilar, 'Marxist History', p. 106.

Osborne, Peter (1992) Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category. *New Left Review* (1/192) . pp. 65-84. ISSN 0028-6060 [Article]. Not least of the problems concerns the character and status of the concept of modernity itself. For it is far from clear that the main figures in recent debates have been writing about, and disputing, the same set of issues when the term has been used. This is of course, in one sense, precisely the point: it is the meaning of "modernity" that is in dispute, and the argument is hardly just terminological. Nonetheless, there remains considerable scope for reflection about what kind of concept "modernity" is, and in particular for a more systematic consideration of the relations between its various uses.

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