

Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development

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Africa always seems to come to the question of modernity from without. Generations of Western scholars have considered Africa as either beyond the pale of the modern (the savage heart of darkness that lurks beyond the edges of the civilized world) or before it (the “primitive”, “traditional” place that is always not-yet in the time of the up-to-date present). Today, scholars who are critical of the evolutionist time-lines and static essentialisms of older modernization paradigms struggle to redescribe Africa as within the modern. Seeking to deprovincialize the notion of the modern, and to sever its automatic connection with the West, they prefer to locate contemporary African social realities within a broader, pluralized notion of the modern, as constituting an “alternative” modernity.¹

What are the implications of the different sorts of answers that have been given to the question of Africa’s relation to “modernity”? Is the idea of “alternative” or “multiple” modernities a useful one? What is at stake in the assertion that African societies are “less modern” than North American and European ones, and what is accomplished by the contrary claim that they are instead only differently modern (“alternatively”)?

I raise this issue not in order to attempt to prescribe how to think about modernity, but rather to foreground an important dimension of the discussion that I think has not yet received enough attention. In the course of foregrounding this dimension, I will deliberately ignore or move into the background other important dimensions of the

debates about modernity. If the picture sketched here seems exaggerated and one-dimensional, it is by design.

It should also be noted that I treat “modernity” here not as an analytic term to be defined and applied, but as what anthropologists call a “native category” – in this case, a native category shared by an enormously heterogeneous population of natives. Vague and confused as the term undoubtedly is when considered as an analytical tool, it remains the center of a powerful “discourse of identity” (as Mary Louise Pratt² has termed it), and a keyword that anchors a host of transnational discussions in and out of the academy about an emerging global social order.

The time of modernization

It is perhaps appropriate to begin by going back to the days when people thought they knew what they meant by modernity: the years following World War II, the days of de-colonization and “emerging nations”, modernization theory and “nation-building”. At the end of empire, a story about the emergence of “new nations” via processes of “modernization” or “development” provided a new grid for interpreting and explaining the world’s inequalities. As the “backward nations” advanced, in this optic, a “modern” form of life encompassing a whole package of elements -- including such things as industrial economies, scientific technologies, liberal democratic politics, nuclear families, and secular world views – would become universalized. In the process, poor countries would overcome their poverty, share in the prosperity of the “developed” world, and take their place as equals in a worldwide family of nations.

This vision, so crudely sketched here, amounted to a powerful political and economic charter. With the world understood as a collection of national societies, global inequalities could be read as the result of the fact that some nations were further along than others on the ladder to a unitary “modernity”. In this way, the narrative of development mapped history against hierarchy, developmental time against political economic status. The progressive nature of historical time being taken for granted, nations could anticipate their inevitable, if gradual, rise in the global order through a natural process of development.

[Insert Figure One here: **Figure One: The Time of Modernization.**]

The diagram is painfully simple, but its virtue is to allow us – even to force us – to apprehend this sense of time analytically, as composed of two dimensions (the two axes, labeled “time” and “status”).³

If “backward nations” were not modern, in this picture, it was because they were not yet modern. Modernity figured as a universal telos, even for the most “traditional” of societies. And the extent to which societies differed from the modern (and – implicitly or explicitly – Western) ideal neatly indexed their “level of development” toward that ideal.

The effect of this powerful narrative was to transform a spatialized global hierarchy into a temporalized (putative) historical sequence. Poor countries (and by implication, the poor people who lived there) were not simply at the bottom, they were at the beginning. And the clear implication was that history -- the passage of developmental time -- would in the nature of things raise the poor countries up to the level of the rich

ones. For those at the bottom of the global hierarchy, the message was clear: wait, have patience, your turn will come.

This picture is so familiar as to appear banal. But before my argument can proceed, it is necessary to take this only too familiar narrative and make it strange. To do this, it will help to look briefly into the past, to a time when such a progressive temporalization of human and societal difference was not at all commonsensical.

Nineteenth century schemes of social evolution, as anthropologists know well, relied on a temporalization of spatial and societal difference that was very close to that found in mid 20th century modernization theory. This was the key device that marked the social evolutionism of our discipline's "founding fathers", conventionally recognized as Louis Henry Morgan in the United States and Edward B. Tyler in Britain. In their speculative schemas of human history, "primitive" societies revealed the earliest history of the human species, while more "advanced" societies showed intermediate stages in a universal human journey from (to use Morgan's categories) the various "statuses" of "savagery", through "barbarism", and finally to "civilization".

However familiar such conceptions may have become, it is worth recalling that in the nineteenth century, they were radically new. As students of the history of anthropology have long observed, the idea of social evolution entailed a radical break, as well as a certain continuity, with older, theological conceptions of a "Great Chain of Being".

The idea that the various creatures of the world formed a great and continuous chain, ranked from highest to lowest, is an idea that the intellectual historian, A. O. Lovejoy famously traced from ancient Greek philosophy all the way up to the 18th

century European philosophers.⁴ According to the principle Lovejoy termed “plenitude”, a perfectly created world would necessarily contain all possible types of being within it. And these various types of being could be ranked – according to their degree of “perfection”, as Aristotle would have it, or according to their distance from God, as later Christian theologians would prefer. Man, having been created in God’s image, was clearly “higher” in this sense than the “lesser” creatures. But non-human creatures themselves were ranked according to the same principle; thus the dog or the horse was higher than the rat, which in turn was higher than the frog or the worm, and so on. And, of course, for medieval thought, Man was not the only sort of being that was close to God; a variety of types of angels (themselves arranged in a “celestial hierarchy”) continued the chain of being upward, providing a continuous series linking the lowest forms of creation to Man, and ultimately to God.

In keeping with such thinking, the various types and conditions of human being also found their place in a natural hierarchy of being. The religious hierarchy itself, of course, took this form, with church offices ranked (like the angels) from high to low. So did relations among different religions, since Christians were understood to be closer to God than adherents of other religions, while “savage” pagans were clearly understood to inhabit the lowest of human conditions. The different social estates, too, were understood as distinct cosmological conditions that could be ranked by their distance from God. Thus the serf’s obligations to his master, like the wife’s submission to her husband or a child’s to its father, was but another form of the legitimate hierarchy that linked Man and God.

[Insert Figure Two here: The Great Chain of Being]

Figure Two: The Great Chain of Being

God

|

Angels

|

Man

|

Animals

lion

dog

rat

frog

worm

|

Plants

|

Inanimate Matter

As racial thinking emerged in its modern form in 18th and 19th century Europe, the supposed racial “types” of homo sapiens were fitted into a similar scheme. The doctrine of polygenism held that the different “races” were created separately by God, and that they held -- by nature and by divine plan -- different ranks in the overall scheme of things. Opponents of such views often protested that “inferior” races were not an original creation, but rather the result of a fall from grace – sometimes understood through the Biblical story of Noah’s curse on his dark son, Ham. In this alternative view, racial difference was a result of history, but it was a history understood as a fall from an original state of grace. Later variations on this theme, notoriously, introduced the idea of racial degeneration, a kind of biologicized version of the Fall.⁵

What is worth underlining in all of this is that such hierarchical rankings of different forms of human and non-human being were not understood as forming a historical or evolutionary progression. It is all too easy for modern eyes to look at Figure Two and see in it a primitive evolutionary schema. But the conception was actually a very different one. As Lovejoy insists, if God’s creation was perfect and complete (and how could it have been otherwise?), then it was also timeless and immutable. The principle of plenitude, he noted was

inconsistent with any belief in progress, or, indeed, in any sort of significant change in the universe as a whole. The Chain of Being, in so far as its continuity and completeness were affirmed on the customary grounds, was a perfect example of an absolutely rigid and static scheme of things.⁶

If some form of temporality did enter into a specifically human history, it was decidedly a non-progressive one. Whether in the form of the fateful expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, or the degeneration of pagan races, the dynamic was that of the Fall. It is for this reason that the transformation of the Great Chain of Being from a timeless ranking to a progressive temporal sequence (a transformation Lovejoy traces to the 18th century) was a true intellectual revolution. Not only did such a shift make possible the Darwinian idea that new species might emerge, via chance variation and natural selection, from older ones; it also licensed the key social evolutionist idea that “primitive” people might represent earlier “stages” of a universal human history, and that historical time was – in the very nature of things -- progressive.

Development and its aftermaths

If the move from a Great Chain of Being to a temporalized evolutionary progression was a sort of epistemic break, the shift from 19th century evolutionism to late 20th century modernization schemes constituted a break of a quite different kind. For it entailed not a revolutionary new notion of time, but instead an insertion of an only-too-familiar evolutionist temporalization of difference into a quite specific political and historical moment. In the context of decolonization and movements for national independence, the development story was no abstract scientific theory. On the contrary, it provided a vital, necessary narrative that could serve both as a charter legitimating and justifying the abrupt withdrawal of the colonial powers, and as a blueprint for the “nation-building” and “economic development” programs of the new, post-independence elites.⁷ I will return to this point shortly.

It has been widely observed that developmentalist models have in some measure lost credibility in recent years. Some scholars have interpreted this conjuncture as the advent of a new, hopeful “post-development” era.⁸ Such formulations should give us pause, not least because such “era”-thinking is itself so closely tied to a developmentalist conception of history. But the more fundamental problem with such claims is that they are not quite true, at least not everywhere. The claim that “development” is over would surely sound strange to many people in, say, South Korea, or China, who seem to take both “development” and its promises very seriously indeed (and not without reason). A more precise way of posing the problem might be to say that while developmental narratives have hardly disappeared, they have undoubtedly lost much of their credibility for certain people in certain places. This way of putting it underlines a fact that seems quite crucial to grasping the specificity of the present: that is that the loss of credulity toward narratives of social and economic development has occurred not universally, but in specific ways and in specific places (i.e., there is a regional specificity to this loss of credibility).

Critical social scientists are familiar enough with the intellectual and explanatory failings of developmentalist evolutionary narratives. Modernization theory suggested that the different elements of “modern society” formed a necessary and integrated package. The implication was that things like industrial economies and modern transportation and communications systems necessarily “came with” political democracy; a transition from extended to nuclear families, from communal to individual identities; the rise of bounded, monadic individuals; the secularization of world view; the rise of scientific rationalism and critical reflexivity, etc. Critical ethnographic studies have

shown the need to take apart that package. It is now well established that so-called “traditional” elements can fit together with the various elements of an archetypal modern industrial society without any necessary contradiction. Thus we have become accustomed to accounts of industrial workers with so-called “extended” family structures, of transnational business executives who fear witches, and of white-collar workers who fly in jet airplanes to visit their matrilineal clan elders. Anthropologists of Africa no longer regard such juxtapositions as entailing any “contradiction” or “lag”; modern Africa is today understood as a place of bricolage and creative invention, where bits and pieces of what used to be called “Western modernity” are picked up, combined with local (and not-so-local) resources, and put back together.⁹

But the developmental narrative is increasingly visible as a failure not only in the domain of academic theory, but in practical economic terms as well. The basic premise of post-War developmentalism, of course, was socioeconomic convergence. Yet few talk about African economic convergence with the First World in these times. On the contrary, the economic gulf between the richest and the poorest countries – as indexed by such standard measures as GDP per capita -- is in fact growing rapidly, and most African countries are much further from economic parity with the “First World” today than they were twenty or thirty years ago (indeed, many are worse off even in absolute terms).¹⁰ This may not be “The End of Development”, as some have perhaps overreached in claiming. But the absence of economic convergence in Africa and some other parts of the world is indisputable, even as living standards have indeed risen sharply in some other parts of the former “Third World”, there sustaining continuing dreams of an ascent

to “First World” levels of wealth and security. If “development” is over, it is apparently over in some places, but not in others.

The logical consequence of this, and a crucial one, is a splitting of the world into places that are offered a role in the convergence narrative (e.g. Poland, Turkey, or the handful of neoliberal success stories of East and Southeast Asia – where people still speak unselfconsciously of “transition”, and readily imagine an ultimate convergence with the economic standards of the “First World”), and others that are tracked into that vast, non-convergent holding tank Manuel Castells has called the “fourth world”.¹¹ (Many ex-Soviet areas seem now to be in the position of anxiously awaiting the news about which tracking they will receive). Most of Africa is at the far extreme of the non-convergent, where developmentalist narratives have the least plausibility.

For this reason, the deployment of the idea of alternative modernities in Africa has a rather different significance than it has had in Asia. East and Southeast Asian versions of alternative modernity have mostly argued for the possibility of a parallel track, economically analogous to the West but culturally distinctive. Broadly, the idea has been that it is possible to achieve a “First World” standard of living, while retaining “Asian values”, or maintaining a more restricted notion of individual rights, or avoiding the West’s perceived moral vices, etc.¹² But in Africa, where the idea of economic convergence has lately lost so much plausibility, pluralizing the concept of modernity has been attractive for very different reasons. Academic and non-academic understandings of African societies and cultures have long misunderstood Africa’s difference from the West as anachronistic relic, as somehow not really of the present, as a symptom of backwardness, incomplete development, in short: as “tradition”.¹³ In the face of this,

there is certainly something very appealing, and undoubtedly correct, about emphasizing the modernity of African society, its status as coeval with the West, and part and parcel of the modern. In this spirit, it has been very useful for, for example, Peter Geschiere to insist on “the modernity of witchcraft”, much as it was helpful for Paul Gilroy to identify slavery and its aftermath as unfolding within, rather than outside of, the modern.¹⁴

And yet, I want to argue that the alternative modernity formulation misses what may be most important about the current mutation in the meaning of “modernity” for Africans. To understand why this might be, it may be illuminating to return to the old modernization narrative, and ask what it is at stake in the current collapse of that narrative.

Modernity: From Telos to Status

The modernization narrative was a story, not just about cultural difference, but also about global hierarchy and historical time. It combined these three elements in a unique and powerful (if ultimately mistaken) way.

Figure One shows us the time-line of development, and its two dimensions. As time moves forward, status in a global system rises. History and hierarchy are indissolubly bound to each other, and a movement forward in time is also – necessarily, so long as the developmental time-line holds – a movement “upward” on the scales of development and modernity. This story about history and hierarchy encoded a set of factual claims (about the relation between social, cultural, and economic change) that turn

out to be mostly wrong. But it also encoded a set of political promises (in the context of decolonization and national independence) which remains quite important.

Anthropologists today, working to combat old stereotypes, are eager to say how modern Africa is. Many ordinary Africans might scratch their heads at such a claim. As they examine the decaying infrastructures, non-functioning institutions, and horrific poverty that surround them, they may be more likely to find their situation deplorably non-modern, and to say (as Zambian mineworkers used to sigh to me, ruefully shaking their heads): “This place is not up to date!”. Of course, the two claims have different referents. The anthropologists refer to cultural practices and their previously unappreciated historicity; hence Africa is modern, not “traditional”. But Africans who lament that their life circumstances are not modern enough are not talking about cultural practices; they speak instead of what they view as shamefully inadequate socioeconomic conditions, and their low global rank in relation to other places. These questions of status and standard of living were squarely addressed by the developmental time-line narratives, if only in the form of a promise: “If you are dissatisfied with your conditions, just wait; your society is moving forward and moving upward.” Today, they are more often evaded -- by culturally-minded anthropology and neoliberal economics alike.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that some contemporary Africans seem to feel a sort of nostalgia for the modern. In my own research in Zambia, for instance, mineworkers did not say, “we are modern, but in our own, alternative, way!”, or even “we have never been modern” (as Bruno Latour would have it)¹⁵; they said, in effect: “we used to be modern – or at least well on our way – but now we’ve been denied that opportunity”. Modernity, for them, was not an anticipated future, but a dream to be

remembered from the not-very-distant past. The real future was almost universally understood as bleak, even apocalyptic.¹⁶

Once modernity ceases to be understood as a telos, the question of rank is de-developmentalized, and the stark status differentiations of the global social system sit raw and naked, no longer softened by the promises of the “not yet”. The developmentalist reassurance that history would, by its nature, transform status, that “Third World” people needed only to wait, to have patience, and their turn would come, ceases to convince.

I thought of this old call to “patience” recently, when the Swedish anthropologist, Mats Utas, showed me a photograph from his fieldwork with young men in the Liberian civil war. The photograph showed a young man, standing at a roadblock, waving an assault rifle in the face of a driver who had been stopped. The young man with the rifle wore a T-shirt, on the back of which were written the following English words:

“Patience my ass!”

In a world where developmentalist patience has little to recommend it, the promise of modernization increasingly appears as a broken promise, and the mapped-out pathways leading from the Third World to the First turn out to have been bricked up. The status categories of the contemporary global order, when detemporalized in this fashion, may even come to resemble the fixed status categories of the pre-independence era, when the color bar segmented the social world into a rich, white, “first class” sector, and the poor, black “second class” world of the “natives”.

To be sure, there are those who manage to live a “first class” life even in the poorest countries, enjoying fully “modern” standards of living even in the midst of general deprivation. In contrast to the colonial times, these lucky few today include not

only white expatriates, but also the considerable numbers of local elites who have found great wealth, and not poverty, in the wide open spaces of neoliberal Africa. Yet the fact remains that the new rich of today do not, for the most part, seem to be understood as early examples of a soon-to-be generalized societal destination (as the new elites of the 1960s often were). On the contrary, today's success stories are more likely to be seen as proving the power, not of education and developmental uplift, but of luck, ruthlessness, or even criminality. If the new elites enjoy, as few of their compatriots can, a "modern" way of life, it is not because they are further along, but because they are on top.

Modernity, in this historically specific conjuncture, appears not (as it does to many contemporary anthropologists) as a set of wonderfully diverse and creative cultural practices, but as a global status, and a political-economic condition: the condition of being "first class". Some people and places have it, others don't. The key issues are of membership and rank. Such a conception directly opposes the anthropological urge to construct a plurality of cultural alternatives, while refusing to rank them. Hence two questions: How does one term yield two such different discussions? And why are the anthropologists so out of step with the natives on the meaning of modernity?

To answer this question, it may be useful to think a bit more about what sorts of thinking are possible and necessary in the aftermath of the modernization story.

Decomposing Modernity

Let us return to Figure One, the time of modernization, and take seriously the idea that this picture is, in some sense, falling apart. What does it fall apart into? If it falls apart, what are the parts? We might think of this as analogous to the chemical process of

decomposition. The word, decomposition, suggests death and decay, but it is, in fact, a more basic sort of operation. In a laboratory, for instance, a chemist might perform a “decomposition” of a compound by “cracking” it (normally through the application of heat), thereby “decomposing” it into its constituent elements. A similar conceptual operation is called for if we are to understand the “decomposition” of the developmentalist time-line of modernization. As the mythical coupling of historical time to societal location in a spatialized global hierarchy breaks down, it becomes necessary to take the two axes of Figure One and peel them apart, cracking the compound and releasing the elements that the developmentalist time-line for so long fused into a single figure. When such a “decomposition” is performed on the modernization narrative, what does the decomposition yield? It yields two elements, deriving from the two axes of Figure One.

The first element comes from the horizontal axis of the diagram in Figure One, which may now be understood simply as history. With the time axis now unhinged from questions of status, history is now not a teleological unfolding or a gradual rise through a hierarchical progression, but simply a movement through time (no longer a passage through various “stages of development”). Such a de-developmentalized notion of history no longer has modernity as its telos; insofar as different societies share the modern world, in the new conception, they negotiate modernity in different ways, through a variety of coeval paths. Hence we come to speak not of sequential stages of modernization, but of a variety of “alternative modernities”. With social and cultural difference no longer serialized, modernity is plural, history is contingent. The telos is gone. The key themes here are plurality, fragmentation, and contingency.

But there is also – less remarked – the second axis of the diagram. This is the axis of hierarchy. Now, with idea of temporal sequence removed, location in the hierarchy no longer indexes a “stage of advancement”, but simply a rank in a global political economic order. Insofar as such ranks have lost any necessary relation to developmental time, they become not stages to be passed through, but non-serialized statuses, separated from each other by exclusionary walls, not developmental stairways. Modernity in this sense comes to appear as a standard of living, a status, not a telos. The global hierarchy is thereby de-developmentalized, and appears as static, without the promise of serialization. Key questions here are not about development and sequence, but about edges, walls, and borders.

The first axis (de-developmentalized time) yields a non-serialized, coeval cultural difference. This is the element of the decomposition that so many anthropologists have lately seized upon with such enthusiasm, the terrain of “alternative modernities”. The anthropological excitement is not misplaced; the insistence on viewing cultural differences as non-serial and contemporary, as “coeval” in Johannes Fabian’s sense¹⁷, and the commitment to de-developmentalizing our understanding of a global modernity has undoubtedly been very revealing. It has opened up for analysis a vast terrain of hybrids and bricolage, of creative invention and emergent new possibilities. It is undoubtedly an area where a great deal of valuable work has recently been done.

But what about the second axis? Here, the decomposition procedure yields a second, less benign residue: non-serialized, coeval, but ranked political-economic statuses. If the first axis (once unhinged) shows us a modernity newly understood as plural, the second shows us a different understanding of modernity in which, no longer

promised as a telos, it has come to be simply a status – a standard of living to which some have rights by birth, from which others are simply, but unequivocally, excluded.

As understandings of the modern have shifted in this way, the vast majority of Africans today who are denied the status of modernity increasingly come to be seen, and may even (sometimes, and in complex ways) come to see themselves, not as “less developed”, but simply as less. As people lose faith in developmental time, the global status hierarchy comes to be understood in new and disturbing ways.

Among the emergent possibilities that are coming into view, perhaps the most obvious is an understanding of global statuses as detemporalized. Rather than poor countries being understood as behind “the West” -- playing catch-up, developing, or emerging -- they are increasingly understood as naturally, perhaps even racially, beneath it. This is visible both in popular ideology and some journalistic treatments in the West, which seem increasingly content these days to treat the economic and humanitarian crises in Africa as just more evidence of the way “those places”, “over there” are. But it is also evident in some African self-conceptions, where the optimistic mood of a developmentalist era has – at least in some specific social locations – given way to a much bleaker view that identifies “Africa” with an unchanging future of hardship and suffering.¹⁸

What is new here is not the existence of negative and even stereotypical images of Africa, for those go back a very long way, but rather the fact that such pictures today seem less dependent on a temporal frame that would fit “African troubles” into a progressive developmental trajectory. In such detemporalized visions of Africa as a continent by nature given to poverty, turmoil, and low global status, the Great Chain of

Being threatens to reappear, with the different conditions of different statuses of people appearing simply as a naturally or divinely ordained, unchanging order. If the postcolonial condition is, as some have suggested, most fundamentally characterized by a perceived temporal disjuncture (with post-colonial nations and societies imagined as “behind” or “belated” in developmental time),¹⁹ then the de-developmentalization of historical time promises to leave postcoloniality itself ironically “out of date”, not by ending or overcoming colonial inequality, but by rendering obsolete that very hope and dream.

The detemporalization of global statuses is not the only alternative to the developmentalist vision of progressive stages. Another possibility (though perhaps no less problematic) exists in the form of non-progressive temporalizations. That is, statuses and conditions of peoples and nations may be understood to change over time, but not in a progressive way. One version of such a non-progressive temporalization, of course, is found in the idea of degeneration, where the temporal dynamic is one not of progress, but of decline, decay, and disintegration (again, a world picture with a long and disturbing pedigree). This may be readily observed in accounts of Africa in the genre we might term journalistic Malthusianism. Robert Kaplan’s The Coming Anarchy, is perhaps the best known (though hardly the only) example.²⁰ Kaplan paints a vivid picture of an Africa at the leading edge of a downward spiral into chaos, poverty, and war that might eventually sweep up the entire planet. This picture is not detemporalized or static, but neither is it a progress story. The worst off, in such a view, are not the “least developed”, those still at the start of their long journey of uplift and improvement. Rather, the worst

off are those who are furthest along a very different journey: a downward slide into degeneration, chaos, and violence.²¹

Yet another sort of non-progressive temporalization of economic distress may be detected in what we might call “apocalyptic temporalizations”. At a time when more and more people (both in Africa and in much of the rest of the world) reckon world-historical time by referring not to the calendar or the Five Year Plan, but rather to the Book of Revelations, the question of “development” threatens to be displaced by the question of the “End Times”. Many examples of this might be cited. The one that most recently struck me was the televised comment of a refugee from the recent volcanic eruptions in Goma, in the Congo. Having lived through genocide, civil war, starvation, cholera, and years of life in a refugee camp, the man betrayed little fear in the face of the terrifying volcano. After all, he reasoned, “we have read about these things in the Bible. The Lord will be coming for us soon.” One should be wary of forcing over-simple interpretations on this kind of material, but it is perhaps worth suggesting that there may be some relation between the fading credibility of developmental time, on the one hand, and the rise of new spiritualities, and their associated temporalities, on the other.²²

Such new understandings of the temporal dynamics of social and economic well-being (of the relation, that is, between history and hierarchy) may bring with them new strategies through which people seek to secure their own futures. One thing that seems to come up all over the continent in recent years is a shift from a focus on temporal dynamics of societal progress toward a new reliance on individual and familial strategies of spatial mobility. How is one to escape the status of being “a poor African”? Not by “patience” and the progress of national or societal development, but by leaving, going

elsewhere, even in face of terrible danger.²³ Today, anthropologists in Africa tend to be asked not “What can you do for us” (that time-honored question) but rather: “How can I get out of this place?” Not progress, then, but egress. If escape, too, is blocked, other avenues may involve violently crashing the gates of the “first class”, smashing the bricked up walls and breaking through, if only temporarily, to the “other side” of privilege and plenty. As Mbembe has observed, the contemporary African experience is not simply one of economic deprivation; rather, it involves “an economy of desired goods that are known, that may sometimes be seen, that one wants to enjoy, but to which one will never have material access”; the appropriation of goods “through pillage and violent seizure” here finds its logical place alongside a range of “shadow interventions in the phatasmatic realm.”²⁴ In this way, the developmental life course is displaced by a life course “assimilated to a game of chance, a lottery, in which the existential temporal horizon is colonized by the immediate present and by prosaic short-term calculations.” Patience my ass.

To the extent that the global status system is detemporalized, or retemporalized in non-progressive ways, the nature of the relation between the global rich and the global poor is transformed. For in a world of non-serialized political economic statuses, the key questions are no longer temporal ones of societal becoming (development, modernization), but spatialized ones of policing the edges of a status group. Hence the new prominence of walls, borders, and high technologies of social exclusion in an era that likes to imagine itself as characterized by ever-expanding connection and communication.²⁵

My thesis has been that anthropologists have lately tended to focus on the first axis of the developmental diagram, the first product of modernity's decomposition -- a happy story about plurality and non-ranked cultural difference -- to the neglect of the second, which yields relatively fixed global statuses, and a detemporalized world socio-economic hierarchy. In this way, the application of a language of alternative modernities to the most impoverished regions of the globe has become a way of not talking about the non-serialized, detemporalized political economic statuses of our time -- indeed, a way of turning away from the question of a radically worsening global inequality and its consequences. Forcing the question of Africa's political-economic crisis to the center of contemporary discussions of modernity is a way of insisting on the second product of modernity's decomposition: the enduring axis of hierarchy, exclusion, and abjection, and the pressing political struggle for recognition and membership in the emerging social reality we call "the global".

Notes

For recent general discussions on “alternative” or “multiple” modernities, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001); Daedalus, Special issue on “Multiple modernities,” *Daedalus* 129(1), 2000. For the discussion on “African modernity”, see Jean and John L. Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999);

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2Mary Louise Pratt, “Modernity and Periphery: Towards a Global and Relational Analysis,” in Elizabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, ed., *Beyond Dichotomies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), p. 183.

3 I label the vertical axis “status” as a way of insisting on the way that narratives of modernization encoded claims to a rising standing in the world that involved more than simply questions of income or Gross National Product. I wish thereby to foreground the idea of the tradition-modernity system as what anthropologists call a “prestige system,” a matter not simply of “ahead” and “behind”, but also a matter of what is known – again, in the language of political anthropology – as “rank”. As later discussion will show, I also seek to make connections with what the 19th century social evolutionist Lewis Henry Morgan termed the “statuses” of “savagery”, “barbarism”, and “civilization”, and with the idea of a status as a durable, and even “static”, condition.

4 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936).

5See Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996); George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1978).

6 Lovejoy, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

7See Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Frederick Cooper, "Modernizing Bureaucrats, Backward Africans, and the Development Concept," in Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, eds., *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

8Wolfgang Sachs, ed., *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (London: Zed Books, 1992); Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995); Majid Rahnema, with Victoria Bawtree, eds., *The Post-development Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

9See Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere, eds., *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Jean and John L. Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Donald L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger, eds., *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1996); Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Karen Tranberg Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Second-hand Clothing and Zambia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

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12 See, for instance, Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).

13 See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

14 Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1997); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

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17 Johannes Fabian, *op. cit.*.

18 Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 1999.

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21 On visions of degeneration in journalistic depictions of Africa, see Liisa Malkki, "Figures of the Future: Violence, Dystopia, and the Imagination of Africa," manuscript.

22 On new forms of Christianity in Africa, see Harri Englund, "The Dead Hand of Human Rights: Contrasting Christianities in Post-transition Malawi," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 38(4):579-603, 2000; Rijk van Dijk, "Pentecostalism, Cultural Memory and the State: Contested Representations of Time in Postcolonial Malawi, in Richard P. Werbner, ed., *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power* (London: Zed Books, 1999); Erica Bornstein, *The Spirit of Development: Protestant NGOs, Morality, and Economics in Zimbabwe* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Africa World Press, 1999); Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere, eds., *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

23 See James Ferguson, "Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the 'New World Society'," *Cultural Anthropology* 17(4): 551-569, 2002.

24 Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-writing," *Public Culture* 14(1): 271, 2002.

25 James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 234-254; James Ferguson, "Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the 'New World Society'," *Cultural Anthropology* 17(4): 551-569, 2002.

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