

### **3. Constructing the Conjuncture: Struggling over modernity**

#### **I. Introduction**

I have suggested that cultural studies aims to provide a “better” understanding of ‘what’s going on,’ embracing two criteria of judgment: first, a certain ‘empirics’ that is not defined by concepts of reflection or correspondence. Rather, cultural studies is part of a broader effort to define a “new empiricism” in which knowledge is understood as an act within the world rather than a representation of the world. Second, cultural studies entails a certain ethico-political project, insofar as it seeks to (re) constitute “a context of possibilities.” I use this phrase to distinguish the cultural studies project from the effort to think in a utopian register. Instead, in my view, cultural studies has a more modest commitment to producing knowledge that illuminates the conjuncture and explores the possibilities of changing it; thus, it always presupposes a reconstitution of imagination in the context of its own analysis. It aims to give people an understanding of the contingency of the present. If the present context did not have to be this way, if it was not guaranteed in advance, then it could have been otherwise, and it can be something different in the future. It inquires into the possibilities for the future disclosed in the present. Cultural studies tries to understand the present; it tries to make visible other trajectories into other futures, and to formulate strategies to get us from here to there. I will return to the political dimension of the cultural studies project at the end of this chapter, to try to address why it is so deeply embedded within cultural studies itself and why it continues to be a vital aspect of the responsibility of the intellectual in the contemporary world. At the same time, I want to try to specify in greater the particular nature of this commitment, and its ethico-political grounding.

The starting point for such an endeavor must always be to analyze the conjuncture as a problem space, and to theorize the problematic. Identifying a conjuncture as a problem space, specifying its problematic as it were (although there are always other stories that could be told, other problematics that could be identified), is not the same as identifying its “essence.” A problematic is not an essence; it is the way the various crises and contradictions of a conjuncture are articulated and lived as a singular political crisis or struggle. This chapter suggests one possible analysis of the problem space of the contemporary conjuncture, and begins to consider its consequences. I begin by contrasting what has become the most common diagnosis of the conjuncture—through a concept of globalization—with my own conclusions derived from my earlier researches (Grossberg, 2005) on the changing place of kids in U.S. society over the past forty years. I then briefly consider some of the reasons why progressive intellectuals continue to tell “bad stories” and I offer my own conjunctural story of a struggle over the “coming modernities.” I survey some of the ways modernity has been understood and theorized, focusing especially on the concept of hybrid or alternative modernities, and on cultural theories of (the failures) of modernity, and the limits of such models for opening the conjuncture to the future. Finally, I return to the question of the political commitment of cultural studies and the political responsibility of the intellectual.

#### **II. From globalization to the politics of kids**

We are living in the multiple milieus, territories and diagrams of an emergent (and transforming) crisis around the ability of the West to organize consensus, to achieve a balance in the field of forces, and to imagine new forms of political settlement. Such struggles, call them hegemonic if you will, produce the sense of crises as a scarcity of political possibility and imagination, just as easily as capitalism produces financial and commodity scarcities, each as the condition of their own possibility. This crisis is also an imagination insofar as it results partly from the apparent failure of the two most common—temporally defined—forms of political

mobilization: either dreaming of future generations of innocent children, or remembering past generations of oppressed (and sometimes rebellious) ancestors.

There is also no consensus about the problematic we are confronting although many social and cultural critics have assumed, too closely following the lead of the dominant political and economic discourses, that the demand of the contemporary conjuncture is best framed as a problematic of globalization. This has two distinct advantages for cultural studies. First, it poses the challenge of political economy in very real and immediate ways. Second, it forces cultural studies not only to think beyond local and national scenes but also to retheorize these concepts in the light of the complexities of the contemporary relational geographies of power. The turn to globalization has been productive, opening up important debates, challenging sedimented assumptions, and enabling the observation of greater complexity by mapping some of the many determining relations operating across diverse spatialities. It has pushed those of us committed to the project of cultural studies—especially those of us in the insular West and the even more insular English-speaking West, to take seriously the internationalization not only of the conjunctures we inhabit but also of the conversation of cultural studies. And it has made us more self-reflective about the forms of our own provincialism, and the many instances in which, whether we know it or not, we universalize from the specificity of our own singular context.

However, I think that the disadvantages and weaknesses of conceptualizing the problematic in terms of globalization heavily outweigh the advantages. Too often, the nature of contemporary economic relations is too quickly assumed, and its complexity too quickly reduced to “the global capitalist economy” under the sign of “neo-liberalism.” Globalization often ends up throwing us back into the very sorts of arguments—“the bottom line is always economic”—that cultural studies has been arguing against for decades. By assuming it is always and all about the economy (stupid!), it renders invisible other developments that are equally important and equally troubling, such as the “globalization” of new forms of conservative politics, of fundamentalist structures of feeling (not only in religion, but in politics, identity, etc.) and of evangelical Christianity, to name but a few.

While the re-imagination of the spatiality of the contexts with which we have to engage is an important step forward, globalization theory does so, too often, in under-theorized ways, continuing to treat space as a largely empty and passive void, a container of temporal processes. At its best, such work follows Lefebvre’s (1991a) argument that space is both made (emergent) and given (real), but it fails to see, following Massey (1992), that space has a density (substance) of its own, that space is active, dynamic, and agential, and that it has “specific forms of operations and interactions” (Kristin Ross, quoted in Massey, 1993, 67). Massey (2005) argues that space is constituted through interaction and is itself the unfolding of interaction. Even more, space is the very possibility of the existence of a simultaneous heterogeneity or multiplicity—a positive multiplicity rather than the negative multiplicity of deconstruction or fragmentation. Part of what is at stake here, in my terms, also involves recognizing the complexity and multiplicity of the contexts of globalization, as overlapping and competing geographies of locations, places and diagrams, with their different logics of boundaries (coding), connectivities (territorializing) and stratifications.

Globalization theory often assumes that it knows in advance the answer to the most difficult questions in conjunctural analysis: What is new? What is old? What is rearticulated? Moreover, even a cursory glance at the literature on globalization makes clear that there is a palpable undecidability about exactly where the question is, what sort of data are relevant, and how to interpret them. (Grossberg, 1997d, 1999). Finally, the discourses of globalization often set

up a particular structural logic--an inescapable, binary logic of the global versus the local, which is applied across every possible dimension. For example:

Global	Local
universal	specific
abstract	concrete
homogeneous (same)	heterogeneous (different)
dominance	resistance
power	agency
economics	culture
structure	experience

This logic continually reemerges despite arguments by the likes of Stuart Hall (1991) that capitalism — almost always assumed to be the agency of globalization — always has operated on and produced difference.

At the same time, much of the work of globalization theory can be seen as a somewhat failed attempt to get out of its own logic by championing notions of hybridity or “glocalization.” This has produced an “ethnographical imaginary” at the center of such arguments according to which the reality of globalization and the fact of resistance is always and only established at the level of the ethnographical locale. I say failed because hybridity is not a solution but the given condition of all human reality, the starting point for theorization rather than the theoretical solution to an unsolved equation.<sup>1</sup> Even the practices of globalization are hybrid! At the same time, the complexity of contemporary conjunctures cannot be distributed so neatly either in space or time. Theories of globalization tend to contrast the complexity of the new with the simplicity of the old, assuming a conception of the before times that is at best mythical. A more useful understanding of the present would recognize that if the old was never as simple, or homogeneous, or local, or unified as we imagine, the present is probably not as fractured, or heterogeneous, or global as we assume. And from the other side, we might say that globalization is not new. Not only has the world always been marked by specific global formations, people have always been affected by forces operating over great distances. And at the same time, as George Yúdice (80) points out, most people continue to live and act “in accordance with background assumptions rooted in national culture, in national formations.”

For these and other reasons, I do not think that globalization is a useful definition of the contemporary problematic, or a useful starting point for an analysis of the contemporary conjuncture(s). Instead, I want to turn to my previous researches (Grossberg, 2005), which attempted to enter the conjuncture in U.S., by considering the immense changes, over the past forty years or so, in the what have been acceptable and normal ways of treating and representing children (those under 18 years old). I began to catalog and confront a rarely acknowledged trajectory from a society that some thought had over-valued its children (even while acknowledging that children had and could be problems) to one that increasingly sees its children as little more than a series of problems to be controlled and contained, and as a potential threat and danger to society itself. I concluded that significant forces were redefining childhood, reshaping the lives of children, and restructuring the place of children in society.

These changes have been inscribed in rhetorics of children as criminals, aliens, predators and monsters, rhetorics that ignore the rampant mistreatment of and violence directed at children. They are embodied in the massive restructuring of children’s time away from imaginative play

into regulated activities. They are visible in the changing status of children in the legal and criminal apparatuses, in the changing treatment protocols of the medical and psychiatric industries, and in the changing practices of and diminishing commitments to education. They are being produced by the increasing cooperation of these three regulative structures, with the support not only of government agencies but apparently, of popular consent. They are obvious in the declining economic well-being of children in the United States, which, despite its economic successes, has achieved the highest child poverty rates in the advanced industrial Atlantic world. I could not—and do not—believe that these changes can be explained by any single cause—whether baby boomers, feminism, media, religious fundamentalism, or capitalism. I could not—and do not—believe that the cumulative effects of these changes—what numerous kids described to me as “being young in America sucks” and others have called “a war against kids”—were intended or desired by any significant political, economic or cultural group. And yet the changes were real, if still incomprehensible.

So I did what I have described as the practice of cultural studies: I built a context around it, to (re-) fabricate the conjuncture. I looked to emergent changes, struggles, and re-articulations that characterized the trajectory of U.S. society only over the past forty years, marked in part by the rise of new formations of conservatism and libertarian capitalism. But I also located them in the more extended context of post-war U.S. society, characterized by the “hegemony” of a certain “liberal” settlement that was challenged (in the 50s and 60s, from all sides) as soon as it was established.

As I began to assemble the elements of a conjunctural puzzle, I identified one line that not only bound some of the contradictions and struggles together but also, more importantly, linked these changes to the changing state of children. I described it—and I think the evidence is all around us—as a dislocation of our experience of and relationship to time, and of the relationships between the three modern ecstasies of time—past, present, and future.<sup>ii</sup> The struggles of the past decades have, intentionally and unintentionally, narrated the collapse and deconstruction of much of euro-modern and twentieth century commonsense assumptions about these relations, especially of the relation between the present and the future. People seem to be losing their faith in their ability to shape the future. It is not that they do not care about the future but that they no longer feel that their caring can shape the future. We take no responsibility for the future, and our actions cannot be guided by any conception of the possible consequences in the future. And when we do envision the future, it comes to us in one of two forms: in apocalyptic terms (e.g., in both religious and environmental rhetorics) as an absolute break with the familiar and normal, which can be experienced as either danger or salvation; and as a resource to be used and used up in the present, for the benefit of the present. (in various military and economic discourses and practices). As Martin (2007, 136) observes, changes in various military and economic discourses and practices “have brought the time of the future into the present in a manner that may augur [a] dramatic . . . shift for our times.” The most immediate result is that we live within a shrinking horizon of time, that we increasingly see the future in the short-term, almost as if it were the present.

This broader vision of the conjuncture allowed me to make sense of what was happening to kids. While I think kids are caught at the intersection of a number of different struggles, the most powerful of these is a struggle over “the question of the future”—over our assumptions about the relation between the present and the future. Such assumptions structure the ways we think we can act to shape the future, and our sense of an ethical responsibility to the future. The common sense of the North Atlantic societies for much the twentieth century, and especially

since the end of the Second World War, assumes a particular, linear, unidirectional and open ended relationship; it assumes that the future leans upon the present in particular –determinate but unpredictable—ways. What we do in the present has some determining power over the future, and that link defines the present’s responsibility to (if not for) the future.

In the same historical space, the U.S. identified children with the future and its imagination of that future, and it created a particularly privileged emotional and social place for them. Whether one believed in progress or not, children were seen as the living guarantee that the future would be different from the present. They embodied the obligation that the present must feel for the future, as well as the ability to shape the future in the present, by the way it treats its children in the present and prepares them for a future that can never be entirely known. But such deep structures are historically contingent—and they can be—and are being--challenged and changed. My conclusion was, then, that kids are “caught in the crossfire” of a struggle over our relation to the future, over our deepest assumptions about the responsibility of the present to the future, and the possibilities in the present of bringing about or even influencing the possibilities of the future. Any struggle over the future could not avoid incorporating kids into the spaces of its own struggles.

I argued that these changes pointed to and are part of a larger struggle, built on a politics of shifting temporary alliances, to change the direction and shape of U.S. society (but also, I think of many other national formations not only in the North Atlantic but around the globe). This struggle, as fluid, contingent and ill-defined as it may seem at times, has created a sense of division and antagonism within the social fabric and population not seen, quite literally, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Certainly, insofar as the story I was telling began in the 1970s (when the situation of children began to markedly change), it was largely the story of the victories, partial and incomplete, of the coalitions of the new right and of their successes in profoundly shifting the terrain of many of the structures, feelings and directions of life in the contemporary U.S. The fact that the coalitions have, for the moment, collapsed and their power seriously diminished does not change the fact that they have, over the course of decades, significantly restructured the possibilities of transformation and imagination, as evidenced in the contradictions between the rhetorical and affective successes of a revitalized liberal rhetoric in the 2008 election, and the (necessarily) compromised policies that have followed it. But the story I was telling could not begin in the 1970s, for it mapped out developments that took the story back into the post war decades of the 1940s, 50s and 60s. And the same story—albeit with important differences—continues in the present decade. This is the story of a conjuncture! It is the story of a problem space that I have characterized as struggles against a particular formation of euro-modernity, and a struggle to define the coming modernity.

### **III. Bad stories make bad politics!**

When confronted with the changes and struggles that have defined the conjuncture over the past sixty years, too many political commentators continue to tell the same stories over and over. They explain repeated failure by claiming that people are incapable of discerning the truth or of recognizing lies. It’s an old complaint: if only they knew what we know, they would follow us. The possibility that one’s political message no longer resonates with people’s sense of their own lives, hopes and fears, is rarely considered. The possibility that the stories we tell no longer make sense of the world as it is, is never examined. Instead, political commentators search for narratives of blame. They have to know who the bad guys are, both those explicitly arrayed against them (on the left, since it is all about the economy, it is easy to identify those bad guys) and those who purport to be their allies but are really complicitous with the enemy. On the left,

some blame those who think that cultural issues actually matter. They blame those who think that issues of identity, recognition and multiculturalism matter, because they have made a simple politics of class identity—assuming the unity and allegiance of the working class in a war of the poor against the wealthy—unworkable and unwinnable. They blame academics who have turned to new theories—theories whose vocabularies are far from the everyday discourses of the left and thus appear to widen the gap between academics and activists--to tell better stories of what's going on.

But often, political academics also continue to tell their own bad stories again and again. On the one hand, some of them think the world has not really changed in any significant way, and so they tell the same old stories. And on the other hand, some think the world has changed so much that no part of the old stories are useful. The idea that the stories we tell might need to be reinvented, not out of the thin air of theoretical fashion or the thick fog of political desire, but may actually take serious empirical and theoretical work on the conjuncture — that it may actually require us to be willing to question our assumptions — is too infrequently contemplated.

And too many of those who claim to practice cultural studies seem to have forgotten the project as I have described it here, being more concerned to defend the legitimacy of their particular version or formation. Too many have forgotten that cultural studies is about conjunctures, and that to do it successfully, it has to reinvent itself--its theories, politics and questions--in response to conjunctural conditions and demands. Too many scholars have forgotten, as Morris (1998, 19) so eloquently put it, that “change itself should be the object of study, rather than an event construed as a text, read as a symptom of a ‘condition’ to be diagnosed by cultural critics.” I am alarmed by how unproductive cultural studies has been, especially in the United States, in the face of the changing relations of power, inequality, and injustice, especially over the past thirty-five years, as well as in the face of changing affective and ideological investments and struggles.

I say this not to focus on the work of individuals but on the forms of cultural studies' institutionalization and normalization, on how easy it has been for so many to accept the comfortable places that have been made for it. (I certainly do not exclude myself from this criticism). I do not mean to deny that there is lots of good work, but however much there is, it remains too fractured, too partial, too isolated, too sure of its own practice, too removed from any productive, collaborative conversation that can move it beyond the elaboration of small differences into a serious intellectual-political project within the current conjuncture. We have become lazy—which cannot be measured in labor time, for if anything we are working harder than ever before. Financial exigencies have changed the daily life of the intellectual in the academy. There are too many demands to be productive, and they are too insistent, too hard to resist (for that is where the rewards are). We have become, like the rest of our society, too risk-averse, and perhaps most importantly, like everyone else, we are increasingly overwhelmed by the context of the many intersecting and determining contexts in which we live and through which we move.

Still I am disheartened by how easy it is to lose the project, to give up not only the focus on change and conjuncture but also the riskiness of cultural studies. It has to be risky because its questions, theories, and politics, and even the objects that make sense as points of entry, are always changing; therefore cultural studies needs to dissociate itself from, and to find the moral courage to criticize, what have become the rigidities and common sense of political and intellectual life, including the ease with which we substitute concepts for empirical work, the cynicism with which we approach or reject too many ideas because of their sources, or the

automatic privilege we give, intellectually and politically, to the marginalized. I am discouraged by how easy it seems to be for cultural studies to become disconnected from the very real political questions and challenges that the world places before us as intellectuals, or to withdraw from our responsibility of questioning the questions themselves. Too often, we seem to want to make the world answer our questions, illustrate our concepts, take up our politics. These are often the result of our willingness to let our theory or our politics do the work for us as scholars. As John Clarke (personal communication, 8/25/08) once described it to me, such shortcuts produce an intolerable mixture of political or theoretical certainty and empirical ignorance. That is why it is so important that cultural studies continue to be able to tell us things we don't know, to surprise us, to tell us that we are wrong.

I am not nostalgic for some previous moment of cultural studies; I do not read the history of cultural studies as a narrative of either progress or decline. I want to suggest that there have been moments when, for many different reasons and as a result of many different determinations, political intellectuals were able to more fully realize the project of cultural studies, without necessarily doing it self-consciously; in general, the history of cultural studies has been a history of mixed results. I presume this is as it must be and will always be the case. But it seems to me that in the contemporary moment, we might become more self-conscious of the project, and to take it up again. It is not a matter of berating cultural studies or those who claim to practice it, but of challenging us to think beyond the institutional constraints and habits to which we have become accustomed.

Foucault (2008, 187-8) offers a similar critique of much of contemporary political thought, assigning to it what he calls “an inflationary critical value.” He makes four specific charges: (1) too often, critical work “encourages the growth, at a constantly accelerating speed, of the interchangeability of analysis,” enabling one to metonymically slip and slide between examples and across domains (e.g., from social security to concentration camps). (2) Too often, critical work “allows one to practice what could be called a general disqualification by the worst,” enabling one to move, e.g., from harsh prison sentences to the fascist state. (3) Too often, critical theory “enables one to avoid paying the price of reality and actuality” (4). Too often, critical theory “does not carry out a criticism or analysis of itself.”

In an important sense, this book arises out of the project that has defined most of my academic career: to provide a history of the present, to tell a better story about what's going on, and to begin to open new possibilities for imagination and struggle, even for rethinking imagination itself, and in particular for imagining new possibilities for a future that can be reached from the present—one more humane and just than that promised by the trajectories we find ourselves on. How do you redescribe the context, often viewed with some sense of pessimism and even despair, into one of possibilities? This is, I assume, what Williams had in mind when he spoke of “making hope practical, rather than despair convincing” (1983, 240). If bad stories make bad politics, then better stories, while not guaranteeing better politics, open the imagination—of both possibilities and strategies.

#### **IV. A Conjunctural Story**

When you consider the breadth of the sites of struggles in the U.S. over the past sixty years, as well as how deeply they cut into our habitual ways of living and our most basic common sense assumptions, there is an almost epochal “feeling” to the contemporary dislocations and struggles. As I tried to understand the changes I was mapping, as I tried to tell a better conjunctural story, I was reminded of Hall's (1995, 67) claim that we are living in “a highly transitional moment, a very Gramscian conjuncture . . . between the old state that we can

neither fully occupy nor fully leave, and some new state toward which we may be going, but of which we are ignorant. What it feels like in that transitional state is to be ‘post,’ living *in the moment of the post*.” And I was struck by the similarity between this description, written in Britain, and James Carey’s (1997b, 324, 326) observation, from the U.S., that

We are living . . . in a period of enormous disarray in all our institutions and in much of our personal life as well. . . . We are living amidst a cultural meltdown, to be hyperbolic about it, a displacement and transgression of the symbolic, but it is unclear what will replace the terms with which we have navigated our sense of the world and our own nature for at least the last hundred years . . . . Something will be invented to do the cultural work of mapping the social, but that something is at the moment not repressed but merely undiscovered.

Both statements evoke a lovely, somewhat Hegelian, imagery, suggesting that we are in the midst of a rather prolonged and complex organic crisis, which Gramsci (178) explained as follows: “A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity) and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them.” Such a conjunctural crisis challenges cultural studies, because it demands that we produce new concepts and discourses capable of productively describing the changing social realities. Both Hall and Carey suggest that we are living in something of a transitional moment, where the terms of settlement, where the balance in the field of forces, has still yet to be decided and where, in profound ways, the terms—both intellectual and political, both theoretical and analytical—that we use to understand the structures and struggles of power and everyday life may have to be reinvented or at least rethought.

I am reminded of a heuristic image Carey used in his classes to explain the profound transformation of U.S. society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Such changes are often glibly described as modernization or the second industrial revolution, emptying them of their significance in people’s lives. Carey would say that there was a point in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that divided the present from the past in the sense that if you travelled back to a time prior to that point, you would not, could not, feel at home. You would not recognize the reality of “American life.” But if you went back to a time after that point, however different society might seem, however “primitive” and unrealized, you would recognize it as your own world; it would be within your own sphere of possibility. It would be what Williams (1973) called a “knowable reality.” One might say that Carey’s break point marked the transformation, at an almost epochal level, of what “the structure of feeling,” but it does not mark a rupture in the fabric of social life or history, for such changes are always the accumulation over time of the consequences of the complex intersecting and overlapping, cooperative and contradictory, efforts of various agencies, fractions, and institutions. Nevertheless, across the divide of such heuristic breaking points, what we take for granted, such as our assumptions, discourses and practices of engaging with children—or time—can change. This is the story we need to tell.

In the United States, I concluded that I had to locate the specific struggles I had mapped within a broader set of conjunctural struggles that have been taking place for over half a century over and often against the specific configuration of euro-modernity—what I call “liberal modernity”—that developed and came to dominance within the United States between Reconstruction and the 1950s.<sup>iii</sup> The establishment of this particular version of modernity, this specific way of being modern, was neither linear nor evolutionary; it was perhaps never

completed and it was certainly never uncontested, but it did largely come to define the United States and much of the North Atlantic world, as well as strongly shaping many other parts of the world in the twentieth century. Despite the powerfully nationalist discourses of this formation, it was crucially implicated in international relations of power, too quickly glossed as the “Cold War” and movements for independence in the colonized world.

But this formation has been in crisis since the 1950s. At the very moment when liberal modernity seemed to have been securely established following the Second World War, after almost a century of struggle, it came under multiple and widespread attack and even rejection. At the apparent height of success it was already in trouble, as was made visible in anti-colonial and anti-racist movements, in emergent youth cultures, in feminist and other social movements, as well as in the rise of various religious movements and new conservatism. The differences among these attacks suggest that the crisis of liberal modernity cannot be told simply as the result and continuing story of the “baby-boom generation.” Indeed, the conjuncture provided the context within which the invention of the baby boom generation was possible, sensible and even desirable. The multiplicity of struggles suggests the crisis of liberal modernity as even more than simply a crisis of liberalism—in both economic (e.g., free labor) and political (e.g., individualism, tolerance) terms. These struggles were often articulated to and built upon a much broader and deeper sense of a crisis: in terms of both material and lived reality, the world was not how it was supposed to be. This sense of crisis, which was often assumed to be historically unique, became discursively and experientially palpable during the 1960s; it was explicitly used to mobilize Republican politics in the 60s and 70s, and it has continued to dominate national politics since then, articulated as and into a fluid set of anxieties, fears and resentments, on all sides of the political and cultural spectra.

The struggles against liberal modernity are at least as complicated and uneven as were the struggles to establish it; they have been and continue to be waged from a variety of “centers,” “lefts” and “rights” against a perceived “liberal” center, and have produced any number of unequal and unstable alliances. (Obama may be attempting to reclaim that center, but if so, it is a center that has been significantly reconfigured and limited by what has happened during the previous decades. Moreover, Obama is caught in these struggles in ways he can negotiate only in very limited ways, as he tries to overcome the increasing political partisanship while reinvigorating a certain left-liberalism that is already located by that partisanship.) These struggles have involved and continue to be fought out at a wide range of social sites, over a fluid set of cultural, political, and economic issues. A number of different settlements—positions of leadership capable of temporarily organizing the field and defining the trajectories that lead the present into a future—have secured and then lost power. The most obvious of these have been various formations and formulations of what is misleadingly called “neo-liberalism,” but is probably better described as a series of compromise alliances of new conservatives and libertarian (free-market, anti-regulatory) capitalists. But as profound as the victory of these “right” alliances seems to have been, we have witnessed their fragility. In the end, I do not think any sustainable hegemonic position, any stable balance in the field of forces, has been reached in the U.S. since the 1950s (perhaps that is why it is still a site of nostalgic investment?) and the struggles have since become integrated into the everyday life of the nation.

The assemblage of these struggles is best framed as a struggle over what it means to be modern (or in the case specifically of the U.S., what is the appropriate form of “American modernity?”). It has been comprised of what we might describe as an ongoing series of hegemonic struggles, of wars of positions, involving many different changes, and just as many

apparent continuities, all of which have to be articulated together. Different changes and struggles begin at different times, have different speeds, emerge from different projects, encounter different resistances, and operate at different social locations. Yet, taken together, they constitute a struggle—from many political sides, perhaps too many to simply be reduced to the left and the right—over what it means to be modern, mounted against a particular set of assumptions and practices that had themselves been stitched into place through very real struggles through the late 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It is in this spirit that I might turn to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (13):

The conditions that brought about the crisis of modernity have not yet become the conditions to overcome the crisis beyond modernity. Hence the complexity of our transitional period portrayed by oppositional postmodern theory: *we are facing modern problems for which there are no modern solutions*. The search for a postmodern solution is what I call oppositional postmodernism. What is necessary is to start from the disjunction between the modernity of the problems and the postmodernity of the possible solutions, and to turn such disjunction into the urge to ground theories and practices capable of reinventing social emancipation out of the wrecked emancipatory promises of modernity. (emphasis added)

But I do not want to follow Santos into the realms of postmodernity; rather I prefer to traverse the murkier waters of the possibility of other modernities. That is, I would prefer to say that we are facing modern problems for which the current formations and imaginations of modernity—European or North Atlantic modernity (I will treat these as the same, and refer to this broad formation as euro-modernity<sup>iv</sup>)—offers no solutions. While my own researches grounded these conjunctural struggles and changes in a particular national formation, it has become clear to me that the problematic I was assembling not only depended upon lines that traversed many such national boundaries, but also extended into larger conjunctures (without assuming something called “the global”), suggesting that there are multiple and interrelated struggles over modernities in many places, countries, and regions. Moreover, this conjunctural problematic had not only to be located and dispersed in geo-spatial terms, but also in geo-historical terms, for it entailed the articulation of at least three different temporalities (e.g., three different apparent crises): a crisis of euro-modernity, which in a variety of forms has dominated much of the world since the sixteenth century; a crisis of liberal modernity as I have described it above; and most recently, a crisis of the various new conservative models, which from the late 1970s into the present—not only the future but the present is uncertain from many perspectives—has defined the leading efforts to stabilize the two preceding disruptions.<sup>v</sup>

I propose to describe the contemporary problem space as a struggle over modernities, to some extent blurring the lines separating these three temporalities, a struggle to constitute an other modernity, an other way of being modern. I do not think we can say what the outcome is going to be; whatever the coming modernity — the emergent reconfigurations of modernity — is going to be, it will not be the simple realization of any one project. Yet the story that needs to be told will have to understand the complex terrain of struggle and the complex play of forces that are shaping what is going on and determining, in different degrees, the lines of possibility leading to different futures. While this complex conjunctural struggle may signal that we are in the midst of something *like* a larger epochal shift, I think we must avoid thinking of it as a complete change in the nature of social reality, or as a rupture in history, in which everything changes and all the changes somehow line up together, or correspond to each other, so that

everything can be described in, or ascribed to, a single logic. We must be careful because, no doubt, every generation thinks it is living in the great crisis, through a great change, at the true end-time. And yet it may be impossible to completely put such feelings aside in the present conjuncture; still we have to refuse to take it for granted as we seek a way of telling a story that is not simply a narrative of before and after, of the old and the new, but rather, a narrative of change, complexity and multiplicity. And in order to do that, we must think more rigorously about—theorize—the category of modernity itself—as both a descriptive/analytic and a prescriptive/normative category. That is, we need to tell a story that can tell us, that can link together, where we are and where we want to go.

#### **V. The problem space of modernity**

My assumption that the contemporary problematic involves struggles over and around modernity enables me to take seriously the common appeals, in the discourses of new conservatives, libertarian capitalists, evangelical religious groups, as well as many counter-western political movement, to a modernizing project; in fact, there is apparently a very palpable need on the part of those contesting the normalization of twentieth century liberal modernity to present themselves and their project in either modern or anti-modern terms. Further, my analysis has been strengthened by my readings of political intellectuals in the post-colonized worlds of Asia and Latin America (and to a lesser extent, but that is my fault, Africa), where it has been long understood that globalization is but an expression of a more fundamental problematic of modernity (within which different forms of globalization, colonization, and post-colonization have to be located and theorized). For much of the developing world, as well as the non-western developed world, a major challenge of the postwar years has been to think through the possibilities of refusing euro-modernity, of finding an alternative modernity or an alternative to modernity, while in the North Atlantic, many left and postmodern (they are not the same) intellectuals have been satisfied to simply decenter euro-modernity or reject it without any suggestion of where that leaves us.

Therefore this story starts from the argument that, even in its multiplicity and complexity, the contemporary conjuncture(s) foregrounds a problematic of modernity. But if the problem space raises the question of the modern, we still must inquire into the form of the problematic. What is the question of the modern? I will suggest below that rather than decentering euro-modernity, we need to think about modernity in a polycentric or even a-centric way. That is, I want to frame the problematic in terms of the possibility of a multiplicity of modernities, not as an answer to the question but as the question itself.

My efforts to think about modernity are conjunctural. I am not trying to offer a universal – context-free theory-- but a contextually specific story of modernity, constituted by and as a response to my understanding of the present as a struggle with, around and over euro-modernity. This exploration is simultaneously an analytical and an ethico-political project, seeking, as Heidegger (via Bernasconi [1997, 190]) would have it, the “possibility of another beginning . . . the opening of future thinking.” Such a possibility is constructed not as a proposal for a coming modernity but as the re-articulation of the conjuncture, and the construction of a sense of possibilities--what Deleuze would call the virtual, what Williams would call the emergent--already present in our lived reality.

To avoid this challenge, or to get the question wrong, is likely to mean that we are producing analyses that are likely to be either irrelevant or ineffective. And thus we abandon our responsibilities as political intellectuals. I believe it is only through a simultaneously theoretical and empirical investigation into the articulation—the unbecoming and rebecoming--of

modernities, the possibility of other modernities, that we can both understand what's going on in the contemporary world, and reconstitute the context in ways that allow us to move from a grounded pessimism to an earned optimism.

The first task, then, is to specify, to theorize, the problematic. We have to understand what is being interrogated and what is at stake in the problem space. We have to know what the problematic is before we can try to answer it. Let me begin by briefly returning to the post-war era. In that social context, the dominant and most politically influential discourse of the modern in the west was “modernization theory,” popularized by people like Walter Rostow and critiqued by, e.g., Escobar (1995). Modernization theory assumed a singular and stable linear-developmental model of modernity provided by the industrialized capitalist democracies of the North Atlantic. It was a “cold-war” theory, largely propelled by the need to “develop” the “third world” in ways that brought them into the capitalist rather than the communist camp; it assumed the only true and necessary engine of modernization was economic growth, understood as capitalist industrialization in international financial and commodity markets. It assumed that other “features” of modernity, including democracy, individual freedom, secularism, etc., would necessarily follow, or at least be dragged behind, economic growth and development. The essence and origin of modernity was always taken for granted, in advance, predetermined by the theory's economic reductionism. This commonsense embracing of the universalizing impulse of euro-modernity was legitimated by its assumed social and moral superiority.<sup>vi</sup> Of course, it should come as no surprise that variations of modernization (and development) theory continue to exert a powerful influence in contemporary political and economic policies.

The political developments of the decades following World War II, starting with the anti-colonial and civil rights movements, but expanding around the world in the various new social movements and the rise of a critical academic intelligentsia, challenged the assumptions of modernization theory and its understanding of modernity. The effort to contest the singularity and universality of euro-modernity took different lines of argument. First, critics began to foreground some of the “internal” complexity of euro-modernity, a complexity that could be measured by the differences across its many actualizations, both across national formations and within the broader universalizing discourse. Second, critics dismantled the claimed unity by pointing out what Dilip Gaonkar (2001) describes as its own internal opposition between bourgeois (“societal”) and romantic (anti-bourgeois) modernities; and there are other internal contradictions, although they are too often and too easily equated or conflated with the first, such as that between modernization (the primarily economic and technological practices but also social and political forces that produce modernity) and modernism (the cultural expressions of and responses to these changes).

Even more importantly perhaps, political realities, translated into cultural work, demanded that critics “write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the uses of force, the tragedies and ironies that attend it” (Chakrabarty, 2000, 43). Euro-modernity had to be seen as internally fractured, characterized by progress and catastrophe, order and chaos, civilization and barbarism, emancipation and control (Chakrabarty 2000; Gilroy 2000; Santos; Peter Taylor). Euro-modernity was always too willing to ignore and even to erase those sites, both internal and external to the nation, where political society was characterized by violence. Attacks on various subalternized populations, including the colonized, rural peasants and various subordinated minorities, demanded a critique of the urbano-centrism and presumed cosmopolitanism that often legitimated and underlay the distinctive interpellation of the subaltern—by which they became

subjects denied the possibility of their own modernity and, in further acts of negation, often by violence.<sup>vii</sup>

Yet, ironically, such critical practices too often seemed to continue the very logic of singularity and universalization that they purported to criticize in euro-modernity. If we want to avoid the imaginative limits of the euro-modern imagination, we have to pluralize modernity, to see the many different ways in which it has been and can be configured and actualized. We have to realize that what cannot be admitted in modernization theory, in the western commonsense of modernity, that which is always—and must be—left unsaid, is that there are, were and always will be, at any moment, competing visions and even realities of modernity. (After all, were the colonized not also modernized?) Only by acknowledging this can we recognize that the distributive and normative functioning of “modernity” in the west is not an inevitability of modernity itself.

To think about such possibilities, we can begin by recognizing that euro-modernity was never complete and harmonious, always on its way, always becoming. It always included any number of counter- and alternative and anti-modernities, and therefore, it was always becoming something other as it came to rest at, reorganize and even produce a variety of contexts. That is, it was played out in different ways; it was becoming different things at different locations, even as it was being resisted, adopted, appropriated, etc. in specific territories by other forces, struggles and vectors of determination. Consequently we must avoid thinking of modernity as a singular stable machine the dynamics of which are somehow internal to itself, or definable according to a narrative of intentional agency. This is, in its most basic form, the question of the contemporary problem space: how to explore the possibilities of modernity? But this implies three entangled but separable questions: What is it we are speaking of when we speak of “the modern”? How do we avoid a singular universalizing concept of modernity? How can one think the possibility of more than one modernity? In fact, the way one answers the first and second questions, defining and delimiting modernity, has an almost determining influence on the way one answers the final question. In many writers on modernity, the questions are too quick rendered indistinguishable.

The rest of this chapter begins to explore these questions. But it is the last of these questions that drives my efforts to theorize the modern. The question of the possibility of other modernities, the possibility of different ways of being modern (a locution suggested to me by Meaghan Morris), can point in two very different directions, each with its own descriptions and effects: theories of alternative or hybrid modernities, and theories of multiple modernities.<sup>viii</sup> While both might assent to the statement that ‘the modern is never one!’ they embody radically opposed logics of thought and visions of possibility. I want to embrace both of these arguments to varied extents because they each do different work, but it is the latter concept—multiple modernities—that opens up the possibilities of and for imagination. I shall put off the discussion of this concept, and the theoretical work it entails, until the final chapter of this book. In the following sections, I will consider the more common and influential ways in which modernity is thought among contemporary critics.

## **VI. Articulating hybrid modernities.**

At least in part, the “modern” is an imaginary construct and therefore, in some sense (although perhaps not for the reasons he argues), Latour (1993) is right that “No one has ever been modern.” While there are many different ways of defining the modern, and many ways of distributing and organizing such definitions as well, I want to begin by considering (or perhaps constructing) one description of the common sense of the west around modernity. On this view, modernity is an articulation of some variety of different elements, a multiplicity of institutional

structures, cultural logics and social experiences. The “modern” is the product of over four centuries of negotiation, struggle and war, established through a series (both synchronic and diachronic) of compromises, forged on top of the resistance, and the blood, sweat and lives of those who opposed it in the name of tradition, daily life, freedom, or alternative visions of society and futurity.

The common sense description of modernity can take different forms or emphases. Many of them seem to make one causal feature or descriptive dimension essential, while others recognize a plurality of features and conditions.<sup>ix</sup> Some authors emphasize particular macro-institutional structures, each assumed to be inherently distinguishable from its corresponding feature in traditional social orders. Each is generally assumed to have a certain “relative autonomy” or at least its own proper identity.<sup>x</sup> Such institutional identifications may be (and most commonly are) economic—capitalism or industrialization—but they are often also political—nation states, civil society and ideological politics—or cultural—professional institutions of knowledge production, and the production of mass culture.

Other authors see modernity less in institutional terms and more in processual terms or as the realization of one or more social logics: commodification, democratization, individualism (new kinds of subjectivity), difference (as in various border productions, identity productions or the division of public and private spaces, traditional and modern times), bureaucratization, secularism, cosmopolitanism, urbanization, etc. Still, these logics are generally in the socio-institutional spaces of the nation-state. Here I would include Giddens’ important work on time-space distancing, which he asserts affects the very nature of institutions (making them more dis-embedded and self-reflexive) and experience, as well as some interpretations of Foucauldian arguments that modernity is defined by the introduction of new types of rationality/power, such as biopolitics or the camp (Agamben, 1998, 2005).

There is a common “picture” of modernity at work here. Modernity produces new modalities and machineries of politics, moving from absolute power to democracy, making politics the struggle to produce consensus (agreement) through ideology. In democracy, people function as demos (rather than ethnos), as constitutive and legitimating, producing a different mode of belonging to a general will. The state becomes moral and educative, controlling knowledge and truth and eventually education (in the form of a civic religion). And finally, politics is identified with the public (as opposed to the private which is now defined as unregulated economics, religion and family) aspect of social space.

Modernity produces new techniques and loci of sociality; social relations are reorganized around particular versions of family, gender, generation, sexual life, etc. Such relations are incorporated into an equally profound logic, a difference machine, producing particular structures of negativity or negation. Modernity imposes differences on top of multiplicity (fundamentally starting as it were with the distinction between the traditional and the modern or the primitive and the civilized) and then extending to cover the entirety of social life (especially constituting new logics of identity and identification).

Modernity produces particular modes of individuation and subjectivation “by which... human beings are made subjects... subjects to someone else’s control and dependence and tied to his own identity by a conscience and self-knowledge” (Foucault, 1982, 212). These new individuals are assumed to exist prior to collectivities and therefore, they are commonly taken to be the true objects and agents of history (although some positions simply turn the difference on its head, making collectivities prior and the agents of history). But generally, individuals, defined primarily by social identities, are taken as the locus of both sovereignty and agency. Or to put it

differently, a system of identities and differences (negations) becomes the means by which agency is constituted in history. In this sense, modernity entails the (re) invention of the individual and of the relationship of the individual as agent to the forces that produce reality. Viewed from a darker, more Weberian and Foucauldian side, modernity involves new technologies for the control of the conduct of individuals and populations through governmentality.

Modernity also exhibits new ways of producing and distributing economic resources, value and wealth, through the growth of specifically capitalist versions of market and commodity economies and new modes of the appropriation of surplus value through technological, industrial and eventually consumerist and neo-liberal redefinitions of labor as value production. Finally, modernity produces new cultural formations including the proliferation of cultural literacy, expression and agency, the differentiation between high and popular or mass culture, the fragmentation and compartmentalization of the social totality, the new authority of secular knowledge (reason) over tradition and religion, the new sense of possibility and the desirability of change and experimentation, combined with a new faith in science, technology and progress. Bryan Turner (cited in Kahn, 459) offers a nice statement of what I have described and he calls the “Hegel-Marx-Weber” heritage: the “process of modernization, by which the social world comes under the domination of asceticism, secularization, the universalistic claims of instrumental rationality, the differentiation of the various spheres of the life-world, the bureaucratization of economic, political and military practices, and the growing monetarization of values.”

Even more clearly, Hall (1996, 3),<sup>xi</sup> in one of the most developed interpretations of modernity within cultural studies, proposes to analyze

the passage to modernity in terms of a theoretical model based on the interaction of a number of ‘deeply structured processes of change taking place over long periods’ . . . It does not collapse these into a single process (e.g., ‘modernization’), but treats them as different processes, working according to different historical time-scales, whose interaction led to variable and contingent outcomes. As Held observes, ‘the stress is on processes, factors and causal patterns . . . there is no mono-causal explanation—no single phenomenon or set of phenomena—which fully explains [their] rise . . . It is in a combination of factors that the beginnings of an explanation . . . can be found.’

The transition to modernity is explained only by the interaction among political, economic, social and cultural processes. “Modernity, then, was the outcome, not of a single process, but of the condensation of a number of different processes and histories” (7). Nevertheless, each process has its own effects, giving rise to features that, “taken together,” constitute modernity. Modernity emerges from multiple interacting processes that give rise to a specific social formation. There is no one universal logic of development, and no one homogeneous outcome. Hence, modern societies can and do look very different because there is no necessary configuration of the constituents. Thus, Perry Anderson (cited in Hall, 1996a, 13) suggests that the “‘original association in Western Europe’ . . . [of the] different, interdependent ‘organizational clusters’—the polity, the economy, the social, and the cultural . . . ‘was fortuitous.’” However, as I shall argue shortly, Anderson—and such models more generally—gets the argument backwards for the contingent association of the elements presupposes the prior act of separation by which each of these “clusters”—the polity, the economy, etc.—is produced as a separate domain. It is this fragmentation and reification that then calls for their subsequent articulation, and which therefore makes the reality of any totality problematic.

This common description of modernity as a constructed social formation usually translates into a notion of hybrid or alternative modernities (and commonly reiterated in arguments for glocalism or llobalism), where different modernities are seen as variations on a theme. If modernity is comprised of many different pieces and formations, the answer to the second questions appears somewhat obvious, since it result of the constant re-articulation of hybridities. Inevitably, Nevertheless, the result is that, usually, the “meaning” of modernity—within which the possibilities of fragmentation and reconstruction are located—is either under-specified or explicitly identified as European. Modernity is by default identified with its supposed European origins and the particular fragments and themes that define it as an essentially western phenomenon (see, e.g., Giddens, Charles Taylor).

The concept of hybrid or alternative modernities gives us a tool to think about the ways the various and changing efforts to create “modernity” shape the course of history and social change. The S.N. Eisenstadt is one of the most visible proponents of an alternative modernities position, although he calls it “multiple modernities.” He argues that “the best way to understand the contemporary world—indeed to explain the history of modernity—is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural [and institutional and structural, for Eisenstadt, all are necessary to constitute modernities] programs” (2003, 536). Thus, “Western patterns are not the only ‘authentic’ modernities, though they enjoy historical precedence and continue to be a basic reference point for others” (536). The “continuous selection, reinterpretation and reformulation of such themes, [gives] rise to a continuous crystallization of new cultural and political programs of modernity, and the development and reconstruction of new institutional patterns” (526). This selection and reinterpretation is “shaped by the historical experience of these societies in civilization and by the mode of impingement of modernity on them, and of their incorporation into the modern political economic and ideological international frameworks” (528). Eisenstadt emphasizes the complexity and even the contradictions within any configuration of modernity—between control and autonomy, discipline and freedom, universalism and pluralism. Moreover, that complexity and the changing dynamics of multiple modernities extends to the structures and themes that nevertheless define what Eisenstadt calls a “strong common core.” This core includes, among other things: the conception of human agency and its place in the flow of time, the autonomy of man, “an intensive reflexivity . . . around the basic ontological premises of structures of social and political authority,” “a distinctive mode of constructing the boundaries of collectivities and collective identities,” and “its potential capacity for continual self-correction” (Eisenstadt, 2001, 665; see also Therborn, 2003).

Hall (n.d.), in the context of temporality, offers a useful second description of the logic of hybridity: “There is . . . no ‘empty, homogenous (western or global) time.’ There are only ‘the condensations and ellipses, the endless discrepancies and displacements, the syncretisms, mimicries, resistances and translations, which arise when all the different temporalities, while remaining ‘present’ and ‘real’ in their differential effects, are also over-written—rupturally convened—in relation to, and must mark their differences in terms of, the overdetermining effects of western temporalities, systems of representation and power.”

Peter Taylor (1999, 22-5) rejects this understanding of modernity, accusing Hall—and any similarly theory of modernity—of ignoring the “danger, at best, of undervaluing the connections, and at worst of missing the overall nature of what it is to be modern. This division into spheres of activity is certainly ‘particular’ to modernity, but such a singularity implies a real possibility that the division is part of the essence of modernity.” It is unclear at first glance why accusing Hall of holding the position he does is a criticism, but this becomes clearer as Taylor

makes a distinction between multiple moderns and multiple modernities. The former describes a “sectional plurality” that sees the social formation, and modernity, as the result of “separate and autonomous processes,” while the latter assumes modernity is “a coherent combination of social processes.” The former supposedly characterizes Hall’s hybrid modernity, which Taylor claims, agrees with Santos’ (2002) assumption “that modernity and capitalism are two different and autonomous historical processes,” suggesting literally a “physical separation.” Yet Hall clearly rejects any notion of autonomy, or of modernity apart from the interactions among the processes, and like Taylor, he clearly thinks that modernity describes a formation and not the processes. While there are, I believe problems with theories of hybridity, some of which I will discuss later, Taylor’s critique of Hall seems to actually deny the very premise of the plurality of modernities. Taylor is criticizing Hall for refusing to identify modernity with capitalism, which constitutes the essence of any modern social totality. And so, once again, we are back to the economic bottom line (via world systems theory in this case). Yet, perhaps recognizing the weakness of this reduction, he wants also to claim that modernity and capitalism are each embedded within the other, that each is the condition of possibility for the other. Taylor continues to see European history as a developmental, linear process, which allows him to have his essence (“ordinary modernity”) and eat it too. But what Taylor perhaps rightly points to the problem beneath any such notion of modernity as an articulation of relatively autonomous features: is there a necessary core or essence? If not, what is it that brings the different alternatives under the common sign of modernity? Is there a way, as Gilroy (2000) might suggest, to think of modernity as a “changing same” without falling back into the privileging of Europe as the necessary origin and model of modernity?

Theories of hybrid or alternative modernities dominate much of postcolonial and globalization theories and analyses. In one of the most eloquent statements, Gaonkar (2001, 1) argues that modernity always “continues to arrive and emerge,” always in “opportunistic fragments,” so that, as he suggests, “Modernity is inescapable.” And while he asserts that “modernity is not one but many” (17), he quickly reveals that he has hybridity in mind: “everywhere . . . the struggle with modernity is old and familiar” (22). In the end, what it means to say that modernity is multiple is that it is increasingly the result of “creative adaptation,” which “cannot escape the legacy of Western discourse of modernity” (14).” This proliferation of hybrid modernities, with no governing center, nevertheless seems to have a structure or limit imposed on it. This perspective “foregrounds that narrow but critical band of variations consisting of site-specific creative adaptations on the axis of convergence” (18) and “explores the elusive and fragmentary band of similarities that surfaced unexpectedly on the axis of divergence” (23). It is always and only variations on a –European? Western? capitalist? –theme.

The alternative modernities model has been seriously challenged. While many of the criticisms simply fall back into (new) versions of essentialism and reductionism, like Taylor’s above, others seem to have more to contribute to moving my own project of defining the problematic of modernity forward. Scott, for example, argues that such a model is responding to an outdated—and decidedly euro-modern—political problematic of agency and revolution. The stories such models tell are always aimed at displacing a story of submission with one of resistance. That is to say, rather than telling a story that responds to the problematic of modernity, the alternative modernities model operates within a problematic that aims to show that the oppressed are not merely the passive victims of their own oppression, but are active subjects able to forge their own realities that respond to their unequal relations of power. This would include, for example, those like Kahn (659) who would assert that “The ethnographer’s insistence on the

primacy of context, by relativizing and pluralizing modernity, leads us to reject any general and singular understanding of modernity.” Such a view makes alternative modernities into a theory of globalization and the agency of contextually specific social subjects rather than a theory of the modern.

The Ghanaian intellectual Gyekye asks whether the fact that European modernity assimilated elements from non-European sources implies that these sources were modern all along or “bore the tinge of modernity” (269). Similarly, Yack argues that the fact that something (say democracy or capitalism) is modern does not mean that every instance of the modern must exhibit that phenomenon. That is, identity is not necessity and the articulation of any element does not necessarily imply the articulation of all the elements commonly associated with modernization.

Dirlik offers the most direct critique of alternative modernities arguing that “questions of homogenization and heterogenization, sameness and difference, assimilation and differentiation, are misleading in many ways” (76). Thus, “the universalization of Eurocentric practices and values . . . implies merely the dislodging of societies from their historical trajectories before Europe onto new trajectories without any implication of uniformity” (76-7). The confrontation between the non-Atlantic world and European modernity does not necessarily change the former so that it now becomes merely a set of variations on Atlantic themes. Instead, it refracts the already defined directions of change of the non-Atlantic societies so that they become something other than what they might have become if the confrontation had never occurred; but that does not mean that what they become after the encounter with European powers is directly and simply determined by the specificities of or its encounter with euro-modernity.

This echoes Takeuchi’s emphasis on the encounters that produce what we might describe as changing trajectories of becoming modern. He argues that modernity happens in encounters—in spatial encounters with the heterogeneous, but also in temporal encounters with the past as not present. For Takeuchi, it is possible that China was on its way to becoming modern, not as a result of its encounter with the spatial other of Europe, but with its own history, as a temporal other. On the other hand, the temporality of European (euro-centric) modernity depends upon the resistance of spatial encounters (57): “the history of resistance is the history of modernization, and there is no modernization that does not pass through resistance.” And this finally brings the argument full circle: Takeuchi argues that Europe discovers itself (as modern) by becoming itself in its encounters with others. That is, the self-recognition of Europe is only possible in its becoming, its movement, its advancement. This in turn resonates with Wang Hui’s argument that European modernity, as compared with other modernities, is necessarily developmental and teleological. In this sense, it is perhaps not coincidental that Christianity, capitalism and secularism (or science) are all necessarily self-expanding, proselytizing, universalizing endeavors, that each always defines itself always in overcoming the other, even as they define the core as it were of euro-modernity.

Theories of alternative modernities are useful insofar as they argue that any social formation has to be understood as the hybrid product of many articulations. Thus I want to follow the spirit if not the letter of Hall’s position. Modernity is always being produced by the relations and struggles among any number of projects and interests, by the relations and interests among any number of apparatuses of power, operating across different plateaus and organizations. The modern then is the ongoing struggle to remake the material, discursive and affective lived geography of the real. Thus any particular force or effect (capitalism, secularization) can only be understood as located within a specific set of contextual apparatuses working (fighting alongside or against each other) on an already organized field. It is defined by the struggles among a

multiplicity of overlapping, interacting, augmenting, hijacking, redirecting, competing, completing, limited and allied apparatuses, formations and technologies and their specific contextual and conjunctural configurations. Such elements do not necessarily operate only on one (autonomous) domain or level, nor do they each have a singular guaranteed effectivity. In its broadest terms, we might think of modernity as a contradictory and multi-dimensional, ongoing production: of social institutions, ways of life and structures of experience; of maps of intelligibility, affect and value; of the relations of state (power), economy (well-being) and culture (intelligibility, mattering and belonging).

Moreover, I think it is necessary, following the often implicit argument of theories of alternative modernities, to assume that the production of modernities, including the unbecoming and becoming of new modernities and the transformation of one modernity into another, is often the outcome of struggles over the basic configurations of a society, along the lines of what Gramsci called organic crises. I propose to understand modernity as an ongoing contestation, as something to be won, not merely in a struggle over interpretations, but in material struggles over power and the very becoming of reality. The alternative, for example, Beck's (cited in P. Taylor, 26) theory of "the modernization of modernity"—in which the "transition from one modernity to another is created by the 'normal' workings of the existing modernity whose ultimate fulfillment is a new society," and where these workings are "surreptitious, unplanned, unintended, unpolitical" —while seeming to affirm the notion that "many modernities are possible" actually assumes a kind of essential definition of modernity, thus guaranteeing its simple continuity. Changes in modernity are part of the "natural" sociology of flux and change, which Beck separates from the (apparently unnatural) appeals to crises and struggles. His formula (cited in P. Taylor, 26), "The desired + the familiar" = new modernity" guarantees that change (and modernity) is always circumscribed within a very narrow set of possibilities, those that can be desired, i.e., imagined in the present.

But even recognizing that modernity is a site of struggle is not sufficient, obviously, to ensure that one stops thinking of modernity as either singular or stable. Many theories of hybridity continue to treat modernity as if it had a linear if not progressive or regressive trajectory, as if it were evolving through various stages (from early to late and eventually, post); such notions cannot help but assume that the dynamics of modernity are somehow internal to itself. On the other hand, hybridity theories that avoid such evolutionary logics tend to cast the history of modernity in a narrative of ruptures and sometimes, even complete contingency, embracing for example Cho's (57) attempt to envision an alternative modernity "which can be made possible through fractals and postmodern ways of thinking." Her position not unrelated to Appadurai's well-known theory of globalization as constituted by a number of -scapes, Beck, Giddens and Lash's notion of reflexive modernization as a second modernity, Beck's description of "the risk society," and Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity. Yet important questions still remain: In what way does modernity constitute not only the possibilities but also the limits of hybridity? Does modernity in principle constitute or negate the possibility of radical alterity—not only as alternatives to modernity but more importantly, as radically other formations of modernity?

## **VII. Cultural logics of (the failure of) modernity**

Coming from a significantly different direction, Lee's (2006, 358) description of "the global spread of modernity and its mutation into multiple modernities" still leaves euro-modernity as an "inclusive" project at the origin of all possible modernities. But now modernity is "as much a state of mind as a set of objective historical processes" (Kahn, 661). While he rejects the possibility of elaborating "a common core of values inherent to any effort to modernize" (664), he

goes on to assume that modernity involves a drive to world-mastery, and explains its hybridization by appealing to symbolic differences and the varying “cultural content organized around the meaning of identity” (664). In this, Lee’s position is similar to Kahn’s, who similarly argues that modernism, defined at the intersection of rationalization and autonomy, constitutes modernity (661): “Modernity should be seen as a product of contradictory or conflicting cultural processes.”

And this points us to a second way in which North Atlantic intellectuals have tried to define the modern, one that draws very different conclusions about the future and possibilities of modernity. Here modernity is understood in terms of—usually a single—new, deep cultural logic that organizes and determines the very possibilities of all other forms of social practice and organization. The key to such theories, which distinguishes them from the cultural dimensions of the models discussed above, is the cultural logics identified in these positions are often never capable of being fully realized; as a result, modernity is always, to varying degrees, a failed project. Some cultural theories follow on the Kantian and Hegelian foundations of the dominant formations of euro-modernism, explaining modernity from the logics that emerged in the nineteenth century to adjudicate the “discovery” of the necessary distance between consciousness and the world, creating a logic of mediation—whether transcendental or historical—that creates the possibility of hierarchizing the ways human beings construct their own reality. A well-known example is Jurgen Habermas for whom, as Kahn (460) describes it, the modern is “more than a grab bag of social and cultural traits. . . [It is] a process of social differentiation, on the one hand, and cultural autonomization on the other.” Habermas is the leading advocate of identifying modernity with the Enlightenment, and hence, with a project of rationality. Kahn is pointing to the very close connection between notions of rationality and the demands for emancipation and autonomy, of freedom and independence, from any source of limitation, power and determination. The “human” must establish itself, intellectually, morally and politically.<sup>xii</sup>

On the other hand, some of the most interesting examples of this “cultural” definition of modernity are often shaped by anti-Kantian and anti-Hegelian sentiments. Heidegger (1982), for example, understood modernity as the very logic of representation itself (the ‘world-picture’ in its twentieth century configuration) that Kantian philosophy helped put into place. Bauman (1991, 5) defines modernity as “a time when order—of the world, of the human habitant, of the human self, and of the connection between all three—is reflected upon.” More precisely, however, Bauman argues that the modern constitutes itself as a demand for order, where “the other of order is not another order: chaos is its only alternative” (4). In the face of chaos, modernity is constantly fragmenting the world in the search for order and manageability. It is constantly fragmenting, dividing, separating, producing the (binary) other and thus, always confronting itself with even more chaos. If modernity sees chaos as pure negativity, it creates itself as a logic of “compulsive negation,” which is “the positivity of modern culture” (9). Facing its own terror of the chaos that is the inevitable product of mixing or hybridity, “the central fame of [the modern] is position—more precisely, dichotomy” (14) as a negation in which the second members is nothing but the other of the first.

Perhaps the most influential advocate of such a view, especially with some of the political and intellectual positions I will consider in the final chapter, is Bruno Latour, who sees the modern as an impossible attempt to reconcile two logics that are constantly producing and negating each other. On the one hand, and primarily, the modern is about a logic of separation or purification, but on the other hand, the modern is about a logic of translation, mediation or hybridization. But, Latour (1993, 12) suggests, “the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of

hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes—such is the paradox of the moderns.” Modernity is embodied in what Latour refers to as the modern Constitution, which “renders the work of mediation that assembles hybrids, invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable” (34). While the demand for purity and separation attempts to keep everything apart, in reality it proliferates the very thing it claims to prevent. And therefore it calls for an enormous work to hide not only its own culpability but also the growing presence of that which it despises.

The constitutional allegiance to practices of purification results in what Latour calls (1993) the “Great Divide” between Nature and Culture. This is, for Latour, the fundamental assumption of modernity, the basis of many of its most important institutions and commitments. The “great divide” constructs an absolute (negative) difference and divide between culture and nature, the human and the non-human, and distributes entities accordingly: subjectivity, agency, representation, history, etc. to the human; objectivity, passivity, the represented, etc. to nature. Again, while the many realities of hybridity continuously contradict and transgress the divide, it remains the underlying reality of modernity itself. And as Latour (99) himself observes, the (“internal”) divide between culture and nature reproduces itself everywhere, and is responsible for the (“external”) division between the modern and the non-modern: “the Internal Great Divide accounts for the External Great Divide: we [moderns] are the only ones who differentiate absolutely between Nature and Culture whereas in our eyes all the others - whether they are Chinese or Amerindians, Azande or Barouya - cannot really separate what is knowledge from what is society, what is sign from what is thing, what comes from Nature as it is from what their cultures require.”

I believe that such cultural theories are vital to the project of thinking through the problem space of multiple modernities, but they are not sufficient and often, if taken by themselves, they can be disabling. For in the end, they can only conclude and constantly reinscribe the inevitable failure of the project of modernity, condemning the present to be read as the detritus of the failed project. While Habermas might blame that failure on our own institutional choices, and Derrida, Bauman and Latour might blame it on the very impossibility/inescapability of the constitutive logic, and thus, they seem to leave us unable to imagine a better trajectory into the future. As Bauman (1991, 10) puts it, “modernity makes itself possible through setting itself an impossible task.” Modernity is the very setting up of an impossible horizon, which both renders the present always inadequate and the future always impossible.

If Derrida (1998) allows us no way out of the logocentric logic of the modern, Latour denies us any possibility of critique. Although modernity is constituted most fundamentally by the binarism of nature/culture, we cannot really contest this metaphysics; we can only “study in detail the work of production of hybrids and the work of elimination of these same hybrids” (Latour, 1993, 46); we are left with a kind of hyper-empirical ethnography/sociology of criticism itself. Precisely because he reduces modernity to the product of a singular machine or technology, the modern constitution, there is no way out of the very logic he detests, for he describes as non-modern “anyone who takes simultaneously into account the moderns’ Constitution and the population of hybrids that the Constitution rejects and allows to proliferate” (47). So the Latourian is the non-modern who, reproducing the separation of the modern and non-modern, can only succeed in producing her own hybridity. That is, ironically, Latour’s theory ends up having to acknowledge—and make a virtue out of the failure—that it cannot escape the very binary logic that it argues is constitutive of modernity. The only way to escape the separation of nature/culture is to document the endless production of the binarism of purification and hybridity. What Latour cannot acknowledge is the possibility of other logics of difference:

the only way out of this dilemma is to recognize that the given is not a purity that produces hybridities, but a universe of hybridities which is opposed by a specific euro-modern technologies of power that produce negation and separation.

In the end, Latour's theory, like other "cultural theories" of modernity, reduces modernity to a singular epistemological logic, often a single binarism (nature/culture for example) that is claimed to be foundational. It reduces complexity to simple singularity, and reduces the concrete to a conceptual abstraction. The modern as real is produced by the direct actualization of a singular and single vector. All other relations that are constitutive of euro-modernity disappear; this seems to suggest that without the modern constitution, we are left with a reality that resembles a kind of Deleuzian flat ontology rather than the complex historical ontology of the actual. Rather than offering an account of the multiplicity of vectors producing the complexity of actual modernities and struggles, it erases the possibility of popular and institutional politics in favor of a purely conceptual critique of a supposedly universal epistemology, which is, of course, always doomed to fail to realize itself universally. Thus, while Latour's view (as well as other cultural theories) offer some crucial insights to help think the possibility that the modern is never one and therefore, to arrive at a workable theory of multiple modernities, I do not believe such a view can arise directly from within such a framework.

### **VIII. Rethinking modernity and the labor of cultural studies**

As valuable as the work of theories of alternative modernities theories is, by making every modernity into variations on a theme, such theories transform the historical fact that modernity—or at least the dominant forms of modernity—originated in Europe into a logical necessity; they render the question of whether there can be other origins of modernity, and other forms of modernity, impossible. In fact, they do not problematize the modern, in Foucault's sense: "Problematization doesn't mean representation of a pre-existing object, nor the creation by discourse of an object that doesn't exist. It is the totality of discursive or nondiscursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)" (Foucault, 1988, 257). Theories of alternative modernities actually take "the modern" for granted, and more importantly, they take this understanding of the modern as the limit on the possibilities of other modernities. One can imagine other modernities but only within the terms of already existing modernity. And, at the same time, it is usually taken as a corollary that one can never escape these limits because there is no outside of modernity. As a result, these theories preclude at the very beginning any sense of radical normative possibilities that might be opened by the very analysis of the present. And consequently, any normative position, any ethics, must always be exogenous to the considerations of modernity itself. It is also a circular argument: since modernity is singular, there can be no outside; and since there is no outside, you can only critique modernity from inside; and since you can only critique it from inside, the imaginations of other modes of being in the world are always circumscribed by the very modernity from within which one speaks.

If we are to think through the problematic of multiple modernities in relation to both an analytics of the present and the normative possibilities of the future, we need a more complex sense of modernity, built in part on the elaboration of the multiplicity of contexts and the complexity of conjunctures in the previous chapter. These theorizations/tools may help us to prise apart the conjuncture enough to understand the multiplicity of struggles contributing to, and articulated under, the sign of modernity. Further, recognizing the various understandings of contexts also enables us to see that theories of alternative modernity are built upon, and limited

by, their understandings of modernity as either milieus (some set of social and material facts), territories (some set of social and material experiences) or a rather simple singular epistemology (posing as ontologies), without attempting to understand the articulations among them.

I believe the task of understanding modernity as a (still unspecified) multiplicity of ways of being modern, must be carried out in two ways: conjuncturally and ontologically. An ontology of the modern points to a diagram that is constituted through articulations of stratifying, coding and territorializing machines: configuration of time and space, logics of otherness or difference and distributions of forces or lines of becoming. This diagram can be actualized in multiple ways of being modern. By constituting the modern as a set of fundamental relational possibilities, I want to offer different starting points for stories of the coming modernities. An ontology of modernities poses something of a paradoxical challenge: to think modernity from an outside that is already ontologically present inside modernity, but this is only conceivable if one allows for the possibility of a multiplicity of modernities that are not simply variations of euro-modernity but actual others. For the moment, most of the work of formulating such an ontology of modernity will remain a question in search of answers, to be taken up in the final chapter.

Instead, in the next three chapters, I want to explore one dimension of this ontology through more conjunctural work. I am interested in the specific one aspect of that ontology, which I have described as a territorialization, and a crucial element of what is taken for granted about the modern in euro-modernities. As I alluded in the discussion above, in euro-modernity, the social totality is fractured into a series of domains. These domains—the economy, the culture, the state—each stands on its own, apparently disembedded from the totality of social relations. In more contemporary terms, each domain appears to have and operate with a certain autonomy. That is, euro-modernity spatializes itself; it operates as through a particular “territorializing” logic by which the complex topography of the transversal lines of determination and contestation that define a specific reality are organized into discrete social domains. Each of these domains exist in changing but still paradoxical places and forms of what I call “embedded dis-embeddedness.” Specific forms of dis-embeddedness are constructed through forms of embeddedness and in turn, they construct other forms of embeddedness through which their dis-embeddedness is sustained and dispersed through the formation. At the same time, the setting apart of the domains or levels is itself articulated to and by other formative distinctions of euro-modernity, including not only gender and racial differences, but also construction of the public and private, individual and social, elite and popular, etc.

Although euro-modernity grants to each domain a certain (relative) autonomy, we cannot assume that the forms or degrees of that autonomy are the same across domains, social formations or conjunctures. So despite its apparent disembeddedness, a domain continues to be embedded within and relationally constituted by the social formation. It is both embedded and disembedded. More, the form of its embeddedness defines it as disembedded. Moreover, while autonomy is constructed, it is not illusory since it has real effects. That is, claims of disembeddedness are true and yet, not true, since any domain is always relationally implicated in the totality.<sup>xiii</sup> The question is: how can something appear to operate (even actually operate) as disembedded as a result of the forms of its embeddedness? How can it be effectively disembedded by its very embeddedness? In other words, how is something relationally produced as autonomous, without thereby giving up its relationality? How can something be produced as self-producing? How can something be regulated in ways that continuously produce it as self-regulating?

The attempt to understand a concrete instance of embedded disembeddedness is going to require the very double analytic movement that I described above: moving from disembedded to

embedded realities by drawing the lines of connection and relationality in a kind of rhizomatic move; and moving from embedded to disembedded realities by mapping the machines that produce the actual as what it is.

These are the questions at the heart of the next chapter—on economies. In fact, each of the next three chapters will address one of these apparently autonomous domains—economy, culture and politics respectively. In the chapter on culture, I want to argue about the changing forms of its insertion into and effectivities within (i.e., its embeddedness in) the social formation, and how this in fact challenges some of the very euro-modern theorizations of culture underlying work in cultural studies. In the chapter on politics, I want to address the ways the current conceptual proliferation of forms and sites of power, while challenging the continuing fetishism of the state, ends up merely fragmenting or deconstructing the political. By itself, this is insufficient to the task of reconceptualizing the conjuncture and reimagining modernities. In each chapter I want to ask what it means to try to think contextually (discursively, relationally) and conjuncturally.

But in fact, I will be less interested in these chapters in the actual technologies—for example, the changing territorializing machines or practices-- by which these domains have been and continue to be produced as dis-embedded or rendered “autonomous” within euro-modernity, albeit in changing ways. I am more interested in re-embedding them, not by returning them to the virtual per se; rather I want to suggest each of these domains can be understood—deterritorialized-- as a possible dimension of every practice.<sup>xiv</sup> Each defines a set of transversal vectors or forces that construct the social formation. Crucially, I want to suggest that this offers us another way of doing conjunctural analysis, a way that does not depend on a “Humpty-Dumpty” model of conjunctural analysis as re-assembling the pieces that euro-modernity has fractured in the first place. We can map, on these vectors, the lines of struggles, contradictions and transformations, as they are articulated to one another, that constitute the problem space of the conjuncture, the struggle over modernity and the problematic of multiple modernities. Such vectors will not be straight lines that neatly transect social reality; they will be plot lines, meandering all over the space-times of the conjuncture. And the map of the conjuncture as a problem-space will look more like a spider web than either a jigsaw puzzle or a chaotic rhizome. Any site of struggle, a point of crystallization, a strange attractor, will be constituted by the web itself, by the complex and not guaranteed intersection of any number of such lines of force. This is, hopefully, a mode of conjunctural analysis for a time when periodization and geo-specification are too undecideable; it may offer a way to rethink the totality of a formation as something other than reconstruction of a ghostly haunting or an imaginary unity waiting to be reconstituted. It suggests a notion of a mapping or cartography of the conjunctural space-times that poses totality as a problem of the creative production of an other—emergent—actuality out of a rigorous and yet experimental project of intellectual work.

## **IX. Conclusion: Politics and Knowledge**

Before turning to these matters, I want to return to my claim that the heart of cultural studies is defined in part by a necessary—strategic and transformative--relation to power. I began this book by suggesting that cultural studies links questions about the possibilities for political transformation to an analysis of what is going on. That is, if politics is, in part, the art of the possible, then one has to understand what is happening in order to figure out how to go about changing it: “It seems to me that the dimension of what is to be done can only appear within a field of real forces . . . If you want to struggle, here are some key points, here some lines of forces, here are some constrictions and blockages . . . Of course [you need] to know on what field

of real forces we need to get our bearings in order to make a tactically effective analysis” (Foucault, 2007, 3).

Cultural studies seeks to find ways of rethinking imagination itself, of rethinking what it means to analyze a conjuncture in ways that open up the present to other futures, to other “possible” actualities. It attempts to escape the simple utopian projection of realities that have no basis in the realities—both virtual and actual-- of the present in favor of possibilities that can only be imagined through the understanding of the present. Critical work always has two political poles—a negative critique of the dominant in the present and a positive opening up of the present to other possible futures (Striphas [unpublished]). Gramsci distinguished between pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will; Ricoeur between hermeneutics of suspicion and faith, and Sedgwick between a paranoid and a reparative politics.<sup>xv</sup> Critical work at its best works—analytically, theoretically and imaginatively--in the gap between the failed present and the impossible future, but there is no guarantee, no dialectical logic, which connects the two. When critical work overemphasizes the negativity of the present, reinscribing its pessimism, it leaves the positive—as the imagination of a different future—free-floating, dissociated from any sense of the ways it can be actualized as the emergent,<sup>xvi</sup> as what we might think of as the pre-emergent. That is to say, critical work has to articulate the negativity of the present to the positivity of the future. The imagination of a possible future has to be constructed out of and enabled by the analysis of the present. It is only because the present did not have to be the way it is that the future can be some way other than where it appears to be heading.

Thus, for cultural studies, the beginning of all political struggles must be knowledge about where we are, how we got here, and where we are going. Only then can we begin to ask whether there are other possible futures, where we might want to go and how we might get there. The question of politics is not where we want to be but how we get from where we are to where we want to be, hopefully in fundamentally democratic ways, which prevent us from imposing our moral certainties on others, and sliding into what Deleuze and Guattari (1977) describe as the micro-fascisms inside all of us. Yet politics is never entirely pragmatic, nor is it ever completely determined by the exigencies of the present since it depends, deeply and constitutively, on political desires and ethical commitments that are, I believe, at least partly outside the realm of rational or perhaps even intellectual adjudication. Strategic questions lean on more basic, normative questions. We live in an age when it is increasingly difficult not only to distinguish the ethical and the political (which is not to say that it was ever particularly easy) but also to escape the dual traps of universalism and relativism opposition.<sup>xvii</sup> But still, such normative questions cannot be disconnected from the analysis of the present conjuncture, for they are shaped by what it is possible to imagine in the present, and how imagination itself is articulated to contemporary realities and desires.

What is the place of political values and ethical commitments in scholarly work, especially in the light of the powerful contemporary mandate, even the demand, in contemporary academic and intellectual spaces, to be political (and “politically correct”) at any and every moment? This demand takes its most benign form in the claims of engaged scholarship and activist research, and its most malignant forms in the saturation of all knowledge with political identifications. It is the product of two independent commitments: first, a necessary rejection, embodied in cultural studies and elsewhere, of the claims of epistemological universalism and objectivity; and second, an unfortunate and rather unreflective polarizing practice of critical analysis, which replaces the complexities of Foucault’s theory (1980) of the inseparability of knowledge and power with the simple assumption of a guaranteed relation between explicit

political agendas and identities on the one hand, and the forms and contents of knowledge claims on the other.

I want to carefully consider what it means to say that cultural studies is inherently political, that it is defined and driven by its politics. It is inherently political because its very effort to study conjunctures and the effectivities of discourses means that it cannot avoid coming face to face with questions of power—and hence, that its efforts, whether consciously embraced or not, will always be engaged with relations of power. In a sense then, anyone working in cultural studies cannot choose not to change the world, for that choice is actually a choice to leave unexamined and unchallenged the existing relations of power, certainly a political choice. The only choices are how self-consciously one approaches this work, and to what end. So, somewhat inevitably, cultural studies does see itself as intervening into the real world of political struggle, but its intervention is defined by its effort to produce knowledge that may help change the world. Insofar as cultural studies seeks to tell better stories aimed at enabling people to imagine other—better—possibilities for the future as well as other—better—strategies to advance the struggle for such possibilities, politics would seem to be unavoidably present in the project, of cultural studies. Yet it requires us to hold onto the distinction between doing political and intellectual work. It is a premise of this book, and of cultural studies, that knowledge—ideas and analyses—matter and that bad knowledge--bad ideas, bad stories--often results in bad politics. Cultural studies is about the vital role of knowledge in undoing any claim of necessity, and about seeing, opening and realizing possibilities:

Cultural studies' message is a message for academics and intellectuals but, fortunately, for many other people as well. In that sense I have tried to hold together in my own intellectual life, on the one hand the conviction and passion and the devotion to *objective* interpretation, to analysis, to *rigorous* analysis and understanding, to the passion to find out, and to the production of knowledge that we did not know before. But, on the other hand, I am convinced that no intellectual worth his or her salt and no university that wants to hold up its head in the face of the 21st century, can afford to turn dispassionate eyes away from the problem . . . understand what keeps making the lives we live and the societies we live in, profoundly and deeply antihumane. (Hall, 1992b, 17-18, emphasis added)

I have already tried to explain what Hall might mean by “objectivity” here in terms of both theoretical and empirical work, and a certain responsibility to the a world that is not simply the product of our discursive or political desires. I am suggesting that we hold together the two sides of Stengers’ view of knowledge: first, to recognize that “the singularity of scientific arguments is that they involve third parties. Whether they be human or nonhuman is not essential . . . the intervention and production of these reliable witnesses” (85). This enables a kind of rigor that can “speak of the world without passing through the Kantian tribunal” (54). And at the same time, it is not the function of knowledge to “ratify . . . a state of affairs but [to] subject . . . it to the corrosive dynamics of what could be” (143). For Hall, cultural studies demands a commitment to the messy complexity of the real world and the labor of intellectual theorizing and analysis, against the propensity to allow theory or politics to guarantee the conclusions and to let one off the real demands of labor.

But this still leaves unanswered the question of the place and content of specific political values and commitments in cultural studies. I want to take an unpopular—but also incomplete—position, one that many of my friends and allies in cultural studies may not share, that it is not our job as analysts of the contemporary to offer a normative politics or even morally based political

judgments, although it is sometimes unavoidable and perhaps necessary. But it is not my job—as a critical scholar-- to tell people what they should be or should desire. There has to be a difference between scholarship (telling a better story)-- analyzing particular formations and mechanisms of power and subjecting them to the challenge of contingency and possibility--and the statement of political values and enactment of political action, where the latter refers, rather naively for the moment, to collective action aiming to transform the institutions and operations of power and the political. After all, ideas cannot be directly equated to political action, and academic work operates with a different spatio-temporality than political action. At the very least, if everything is political, they are not political in the same way.

The politics of cultural studies are located in the first and the last instances. In the first instance, it is political in relation to the questions it asks. While conjunctures pose their own questions, what we hear is partly determined by our political positionalities. In the last instance, its politics appear at the end of its story, which fabricates the context anew and, in addressing its problematic, opens new possibilities, both imaginative and strategic, for getting somewhere else. But conjunctural analysis does not have a single, guaranteed ethico-political foundation, nor can the political implications of its analyses be guaranteed in advance. At the very least, one cannot control how the stories one tells will be taken up in the name of political struggles.

In the contemporary conjuncture, we need to rethink the grounds and claims of academic authority, responsibility and credibility. Between the first and last instance, in the analytic work of constructing a better story of what is going on, authority is constructed and increasingly lost, responsibility is taken and increasingly abandoned. Unfortunately, I do not have a simple answer for how this is to be done. I am not suggesting we return to notions of value-free knowledge, or objectivity, or correspondence theories of truth. But the all too common unreflective politicization of knowledge, enacted by empowering moral judgments and political desires as conceptual tools or analytic conclusions, only substitutes moral self-righteousness for the difficult and risky work of allowing oneself to be surprised. Some people argue that knowledge is directly political because discourse itself is constructive or performative. Are we not then obliged to construct reality—and produce knowledge-- according to a set of ethico-political commitments? But such a conclusion oversimplifies the complex relations of multiple discourses and non-discursive realities, and ignores the many kinds of performances discourses enact as part of the very realities they help to constitute.

However, I am not claiming that there is a clear or simple distinction between intellectual and political work (as might e.g., Stanley Fish). As I have said, the questions from which we begin respond to political demands, even as we seek answers that may open up new political possibilities. Obviously, the work that takes place between these political demands and desires is shaped by this trajectory, but I believe it is necessary to push against the sometimes overwhelming force of such political concerns and to remain committed to telling the best story possible. Politics too often seems to pull analyses in directions it has determined, creating a neurotic sense of inadequacy in which we assume that if we could just be political enough, in just the right way, we could guarantee the political register and efficacy of our analysis. Instead, we need to accept there is no right story, no perfect story, and no complete or finished story.

We need to be more modest about what we think we know or understand, and about what we are competent to investigate or claim (and political commitment or judgment does not constitute competence). Similarly, practice (or process) does not guarantee either the “truth” of a story or the validity of a political position. The conflation of ontology with conjunctural politics is simply the most recent way politics trumps intellectual labor. An ontology of becoming does not

guarantee the elimination of politics. By identifying a set of analytical concepts—contingency, multiplicity, fluidity, intensities, etc.—with political values, such concepts morph from tools to think with to what look like viable political possibilities. But I doubt that anyone chooses to die for fluidity or multiplicity, although many have been killed for enacting them.

The project of cultural studies is not exhausted by the scholarly work of telling a better story. One cannot hope to change the world based only on a better story. It requires as well engagements in the realm of the public intellect, forms of the performance and sharing of knowledge as a political act and forms of concrete political and institutional work. And while there are multiple ways of articulating (or not) scholarship in the public arenas of political struggle and citizenship, they depend upon contextually effective performances of authority, the possibility of open intellectual debates, and a certain modesty on the part of academics. The authority of knowledge cannot and should not be presented as directly based on or translatable into moral authority or political privilege. Winning people to specific moral values and political visions is a different task than persuading them about the value of the story I am telling.

If the relationship between knowledge (research) and politics is itself contextual, we need to find or invent modes of knowledge production that will be effective in responding to contemporary problem-spaces and struggles. Obviously, insofar as the questions we ask are shaped by our political values and desires, insofar as we are continuously using not only such values and desires but also our own analyses to offer criticisms of the existing organizations of power, insofar as politics is interwoven into our stories, and insofar as politics is pushing us forward, politics is at the heart of cultural studies. But its soul must be its faith in “knowledge,” ideas and better stories.

I am aware that I am still deferring the question of concrete political commitments in cultural studies. Of course, since I do not think that cultural studies has any necessary politics—that there can be and in fact is conservatively inflected cultural studies, I do not think there is any necessary answer to this question. I refuse to believe that it is possible to define one proper relation to power or one set of political commitments. However, perhaps it will help if I say something about my commitments. I have already suggested that I think the political responsibility of the intellectual is defined, first, by the effort to de-naturalize the present and open up the future. In other words, the political intellectual is above all committed to the reality of change itself. I also believe, however, that one’s political desires and sense of obligations cannot be entirely bracketed, even if they have to be held at bay. I do believe that we have an obligation to leave the world a better place, and I believe that requires us to try to enable others—everyone—to be able to fulfill that obligation as well. This second condition provides some content to what constitutes “better,” since it requires us to seek a world in which all people have the material conditions of survival, the political conditions of freedom and justice, and the intellectual conditions of education and expression, as the basis for such a task.<sup>xviii</sup>

But I also believe in what I might call the ethical responsibility of the intellectual, grounded in a commitment to the intellectual conversation as a necessarily never-ending effort to belong with the other. While my intellectual commitment is to the conversation, my ethical commitment is to the other, to the belonging together with the other (as what both Heidegger and Foucault in very different ways call “care”). That is, my own ethical sense is constituted as an obligation to an other, which cannot be too close (family, nation) or too far (god). Rather, the other is what can only be imagined—as a coming community, as a planetary humanity—in its absence, while its presence can only be embraced in its concrete embodiment in every particular instance (in every individual or community). We engage with power for the sake of the other, an

other that is always unknown but knowable, always abstract and yet concretized. This is the obligation to imagine an other world, and to an imagination that can only be produced through the concrete effort to bring it about, to embody it in the concrete practice of relationship as belonging together. And it is there that ethics and politics, practice and desire, meet.

### Notes Chapter 3

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<sup>i</sup> A more interesting approach to globalization might be found through the lens of the post-colonial (Hall, 1996b, 247): “‘Global’ here does not mean universal, but it is not nation-or society-specific either. It is about how the lateral and transverse cross relations of what Gilroy (1993b) calls the “diasporic” supplement and simultaneously dis-place the centre-periphery.”

<sup>ii</sup> I cannot resist giving one of my favorite and strangest examples: an ad for the 41<sup>st</sup> IAA World Congress. The “headline” of the ad was “What’s coming next?” The conference was titled, or perhaps simply described as, “Where ‘now’ is a thing of the past.” [www.whatscomingnext.org](http://www.whatscomingnext.org) Even the rock formation was about time—about rejecting the apparently prescribed future and living that rejection in the present. In this way, it refused the temporal structure of the avant-garde, which continued the temporality of liberal modernity, as a rejection of the present from the position of the future. See Grossberg (1997b).

<sup>iii</sup> I realize that some people may think this understanding of a conjuncture is larger, longer than the way it is typically discussed. And yet Gramsci seems to have believed that the conjunctural forces that set the French Revolution in motion did not end until the 1870s, and in that sense, one might assume, the conjuncture did not end until then as well.

<sup>iv</sup> I realize that North Atlantic is perhaps more descriptive, but given the economics of publishing which counts words, one word is better than three. Additionally, I have found that some intellectuals from outside the North Atlantic world recognize euro-modernity more easily than North Atlantic modernity.

<sup>v</sup> This last crisis, sometimes framed as a crisis of neo-liberalism, has been partly fueled by the rise of China, India, Brazil, etc., and the possibility that we do not yet have the tools for understanding these emergent national formations.

<sup>vi</sup> As John Clarke has pointed out to me (personal communication, February 2009), the cold war formation of euro-modernity rested on “splitting” Europe itself, and “Europe” is still struggling with defining the content and boundaries of Europe.

<sup>vii</sup> See Chatterjee. I am grateful to Srinath Jayaram for his help on these questions.

<sup>viii</sup> One must be careful. These terms are used in very different ways by different authors.

<sup>ix</sup> Two commonly cited conditions of possibility of modernity are technological. On the one hand, scholars have often pointed to the importance of the printing press (and later communicative technologies), which led to the growing dispersion and secularization of culture and hence, to the possibility of the explosion of knowledge. See Eisenstein. On the other hand, developments in military technologies, starting with the invention (or importation) of gunpowder, had profound consequences for the organizations of states and power. See Hall, Held, Hubert and Thompson. I am grateful to Chantal Cornut-Gentile D’Arcy for reminding me of the obvious importance of such technologies in the most common narratives of modernity.

<sup>x</sup> If we are to rethink Euro-modernity from outside as it were, we need to rethink the nature of the social totality: (1) the relation of overdetermination and the assumption that the formation is a structure of different levels; and hence (2) the separation and assumed relative autonomy of the levels.

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<sup>xi</sup> This is actually not the product solely of Hall's efforts and ideas, but of an Open University course team. So it is somewhat problematic to attribute the position to Hall by himself. Still, I think it is not far off.

<sup>xii</sup> Here one might also point to the work of Jameson (2002) who, building on the notion that modernity is the birth of history and historical consciousness, argues that modernity is a fundamental discursive trope of social self-referentiality, through its constant effort at self-definition, through the constitution of its own temporality.

<sup>xiii</sup> This dilemma is often papered over by appeals to more 'scientific' notions derived from systems and complexity theories, as if this somehow rendered the paradoxes more acceptable and less problematic.

<sup>xiv</sup> In the following chapters, I will propose that the social comprises the plane or vectors of value production, the economic that of the commensuration of values, the cultural is mapping and translation, and the political is capture and the production of collectivities.

<sup>xv</sup> I could also add other, including Marx, Hall, Fanon, Gilroy, Cesaire, Chatterjee, C.L.R. James, etc.

<sup>xvi</sup> In one sense, this is the Deleuzean distinction between the virtual and the possible, but I also want to suggest that Deleuzeans fail to make an adequate distinction between the pre-emergent and the emergent. There are always a multiplicity of possible emergent's in the virtual, which must be distinguished not only from the actualization of the emergent and its possible rearticulation.

<sup>xvii</sup> Of course this problem was posed very clearly by Lyotard, whose only solution was entirely within the realm of culture: the only basis for declaring a language game illegitimate is that it negates the existence of other language games. Lyotard seems to miss the crucial appeal in Wittgenstein to the lebensform: language games are only sensible and justifiable in their relationship to a form of life.

<sup>xviii</sup> This still leaves open, intentionally, two questions: first, how does one go about changing the world? Does one first change oneself or the social structure? This is a longstanding argument that divided the counterculture in the 1960s, and continues to trouble various cultural and political movements for change. Second, what is the geography of concern and action? How circumscribed is the relevant sphere of action: answers range from family and community to the national and the world.