FORUM:
PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE

1.

TOWARD A HISTORY ON EQUAL TERMS:
A DISCUSSION OF PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a critical discussion of Dipesh Chakrabarty's book *Provincializing Europe* as well as a first sketch of a History on Equal Terms. After giving a short summary of *Provincializing Europe*, I first argue, against Chakrabarty, that there is no necessary connection between the discipline of history and the metanarratives of modernity. To the contrary: the founding idea of the discipline of history was a turn against such grand narratives. With his attempt to deconstruct the narratives of the European Enlightenment and of modernity, Chakrabarty therefore has to be regarded as a thinker of radical historicism rather than as a critic of the discipline of history. Second, I criticize the use of the term “modernity” in *Provincializing Europe* and the concept of modernity in general. Instead of a deconstruction of the discipline of history, I propose a deconstruction of the concept of modernity. This could open up the way for a History on Equal Terms situated within the discipline of history, that is, a historiography that would—just as Chakrabarty rightly demands—in principle pay the same attention to and expect relevant results from any region in the world, depending only on the focus of research.

I. INTRODUCTION

Eurocentrism has been an important issue in publications on world history at least since the Second World War.¹ But whereas it was not uncommon, up to the 1970s, to defend a focus on Europe because of its importance in world history in the centuries after 1500, historians interested in global history in recent years have frequently denounced any form of Eurocentrism.² The conditions for a non-Euro-

¹ An earlier version of this discussion of *Provincializing Europe* was presented on March 17–18, 2006 at the workshop “Transnationalität in der Praxis” of the Graduiertenkolleg “Transnational Media Events from Early Modern Times to the Present.” For discussion, comments, corrections, and critique, I would like to thank Georg Iggers, Patrick Kupper, Patrick Schmidt, Patricia Sutcliffe, Henning Trüper, and the members of the Graduiertenkolleg. I am especially indebted to Friedrich Lenger, who repeatedly discussed this paper with me and contributed a number of crucial ideas.

centric world history are seldom discussed in detail, however. This is easy to understand: it is widely recognized that the Eurocentrism inherent in historical writing derives from concepts of modernity and theories of modernization, but these concepts and theories are generally either explicitly regarded as indispensable or simply used without further discussion. Thus, most theoretical or introductory texts on world history written in recent years confront the reader with an implicit dilemma: on the one hand, they denounce the Eurocentrism inherent in history-writing; on the other, they adhere to its acknowledged prerogative: modernization theories and the concept of modernity.

The texts of the Subaltern Studies Group are an exception to this rule. Its members not only give special attention to the problem of Eurocentrism in history-writing but also offer one possible solution: the deconstruction of the discipline of history as the place where narratives of modernization and nation-building are mainly produced. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference originates from the context of the Subaltern Studies Group. It is perhaps the most extensive and profound study of the relationship between Eurocentrism and the narratives of modernity in history-writing, connecting a fundamental critique of the discipline of history with the demand for a history of the subaltern.

In the following, I first sum up the main arguments of Chakrabarty’s book (part II). In part III (“History”), I argue that there is no necessary connection between history-writing and the narratives of modernity: on the contrary, at the beginning of the discipline of history there was a turn exactly away from such metanarratives. In part IV (“Modernity”), I criticize the use of the term “modernity” in Provincializing Europe. I propose to use a radical “historicism” (German Historismus) in order to historicize the concept of modernity instead of deconstructing the discipline of history. In part V, a “History on Equal Terms,” I critique the concept of “modernity” in general and sketch out what a history based on a deconstruction of the concept of modernity and within the discipline of history might look like. My overall aim is to analyze Chakrabarty’s book and to take up what can be helpful in order to outline a way of writing world history.

II. PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE

Chakrabarty’s project of provincializing Europe does not aim at any geographical or social entity called Europe. Instead, his Europe stands for the concept of political modernity and the narratives of nation-building, rationalization, secular,

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4. Thus, I concentrate on the aspect of Provincializing Europe that I find the most interesting: the relation between historiography and modernity. I do not discuss Chakrabarty’s proposal for a history of the subaltern.
ization, and so forth, connected with it—narratives used in the writing of history as well as in the social sciences. He calls this metanarrative “historicism” and convincingly illustrates with the following example that this conceptual “Europe” still dominates the world: if Indian scholars want to be up-to-date, they have to take notice of the writings of leading European historians or social scientists, yet the same is not true the other way round: European scholars (up to now) can ignore the writings of their colleagues in India, China, Brazil, Iran, and Kenya without concern about being regarded as provincial or backward and, indeed, without feeling they are missing anything important. According to Chakrabarty, this “asymmetric ignorance” among historians and social scientists highlights the fact that conceptual “Europe,” the metanarrative of political modernity, works as a “silent referent” for the writing of history and the analysis of societies all over the world: as modernization in Europe preceded similar processes everywhere else, there is always a structure of “first in Europe, then elsewhere,” and thus research everywhere needs only to flesh out “a theoretical skeleton that is substantially ‘Europe.’”6 This mode of thought has important political consequences: the British Empire, for instance, claimed that its colonies required a modern state and society to be granted independence. Such a demand implied a constant “not yet” against which the Indian independence movement set its “now.”

The basic components of “historicism,” according to Chakrabarty, are: 1) the idea that there are certain historical laws inherent in phenomena like “capital” and “capitalism” that will unfold with certainty when history progresses; 2) a concept of homogeneous time, into which all other histories and concepts of time are convertible; 3) the belief in a disenchanted world, in other words, the belief that gods and spirits are social artifacts—humans make up their deities; 4) the conviction that it is possible to use the terms of “historicism” to describe different histories, or that one can translate people’s experiences in different life-worlds (such as with gods and spirits) into the analytical vocabulary of “historicism” (belonging to a disenchanted world).

Chakrabarty refutes each of these four points of “historicism,” and thus provincializes Europe, proposing a “subaltern history” in its place. Regarding 1): in his reading of Marx’s Capital, he shows that the category of “living labor” (as opposed to “abstract labor”) introduces a chaotic element, a source of resistance, to the universal and necessary history of capital. Regarding 2): drawing from Walter Benjamin and Albert Einstein, Chakrabarty counters the Newtonian, naturalistic concept of time with a concept of heterotemporality that does not merely acknowledge the various time concepts held by different people, but marks a linguistic turn in chronology that physicists took early in the last century when they expressed the inseparability of events from their descriptions.7 Regarding 3): against the thesis of a disenchanted world, Chakrabarty takes “gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human.”8 Regarding 4): finally, he casts doubt on the translatability of different life-worlds into historicist narratives by emphasizing the limits of such an

6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 74f.
8. Ibid., 16.
endeavor: he proposes that historians translate terms and concepts in a direct way without abstractions being involved, which they can learn from the way Hindu and Muslim gods were “translated” in thirteenth-century India.

Consequently, “subaltern history,” as Chakrabarty imagines it, recounts a history not limited to the empirical peasant in any straightforward sense but one of all figures and experiences that are “necessarily mediated by problems of representation” in the European metanarrative of political modernity.9 For example, history or the social sciences have difficulty integrating the idea of a war ordered by God into their models of explanation. In contrast, in his “histories of belonging”—on the Indian widow and the formation of the modern subject, on the social practice of “adda” (a specific type of conversation between men in nineteenth-century India), and on Bengali concepts of society and the nation—Chakrabarty gives us examples of history-writing that take some of his epistemological considerations into account. Replacing the usual “rough translation” with close analyses of terms, their development, and their contexts, he points to specific differences in Bengali social practices, their meanings, and their historical consequences as compared with “Europe,” and thereby gives an example of the sensitive reading of sources developed in the Subaltern Studies Group.

Chakrabarty does not want to discard the European concept of modernity entirely, however. To him, it poses an insoluble political dilemma because it is both inadequate as well as unavoidable or even indispensable at the same time. It is inadequate, first, because it is centered on Europe and cannot incorporate “traditional” experiences; second, because it is both an analytical and a normative concept, which works on a binary code—modern vs. premodern, traditional, medieval, feudal; and, third, because it implies a judgment, usually pejorative, against everything that is considered to be its opposite.10 At the same time, he considers it to be indispensable because we cannot demand democracy, equality, justice, and social improvements without it. When it comes to the value of these achievements, Chakrabarty is somewhat skeptical, however. Modernity, according to him, is not very livable. One has to find niches like adda to make oneself feel at home somewhere in the modern world. Therefore, Chakrabarty’s goal is to find “a form of social thought that embraces analytical reason in pursuit of social justice but does not allow it to erase the question of heterotemporality from the history of the modern subject.”11 His suggestion is to multiply modernity into different—but equally valuable—modernities, implying multiple traditions and teleologies, a suggestion reinforced by Sudipta Kaviraj, whom he approvingly quotes:

“the more modernity unfolds [the more] it seems to appear inescapably plural. . . . Transition narratives create the increasingly untenable illusion that given all the right conditions, Calcutta would turn into London, and the Bengali rich and poor would ‘understand’ the principles of being private and public in the right ways. In fact, what these strong transition narratives do is to blind us to the responsibility of looking at the shapes and forms our modernity is taking.”12

9. Ibid., 94.
10. Chakrabarty does not consider the ideas of European philosophers who were critical of or ambivalent toward modernity, such as Rousseau, Spengler, and Max Weber.
11. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 239.
12. Ibid., 235f.

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It is the task of writing history, according to Chakrabarty, to bring out these different shapes and forms.

III. HISTORY

For Chakrabarty, the main paradigm of the discipline of history is historicism, which he identifies with the European narratives of modernity. In his introduction, he briefly refers to the complex history of the term “historicism,” summing up the main characteristics of its different definitions. He soon explains, however, that his own understanding and use of it is based on the idea of development. Historicism “takes its object of investigation to be internally unified, and sees it as something developing over time.”13 This is especially true of historical narratives grounded on a Marxist or liberal view, and it is also “what underlies descriptions/explanations in the genre ‘history of’—capitalism, industrialization, nationalism, and so on.”14 Thus, for Chakrabarty, the term “historicism” comprises both Historismus, the founding paradigm of history in nineteenth-century Germany, and historical metanarratives. In this, he follows the common usage of the term in the English language: on the one hand, Georg G. Iggers in his classic The German Conception of History has chapters on “The Origins of German Historicism” and “The Crisis of Historicism;” on the other hand, Karl R. Popper in The Poverty of Historicism criticizes philosophies of history.15

For readers well acquainted with the history of the historical discipline in Germany, this definition is puzzling, and becomes even more so when Chakrabarty equates “historicism” with the discipline of history.16 It is puzzling because it conflates two modes of thinking about history that have opposed and even excluded each other in the history of the discipline. In the wake of the Enlightenment, philosophies of history were written in abundance; it was exactly against these and especially against the idealist version of Hegel that Leopold von Ranke laid the groundwork for a discipline of history that would use methodological and source-based research to ascertain “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (“how it really was,” in the sense of “what really happened”). Therefore, it is important to clearly differentiate between these two modes of historical thinking.17 This is not merely terminological or purely academic but rather gets to the heart of the matter: the difference between Historismus and philosophy of history renders Chakrabarty’s

13. Ibid., 23.
14. Ibid.
16. This equation generally remains implicit. However, it can be well observed on pp. 41 and 237.
17. It is certainly true that historicist historiography has abundantly produced developmental narratives, for example, of the nation, the (in)famous Whig interpretations of history. However, such narratives do not follow from the paradigm of history with any necessity, but rather have to be seen as a relapse. It is equally true that Karl Löwith and Reinhard Koselleck have described connections between the discipline of history and narratives of modernity on a deeper level. However, this is not the connection Chakrabarty seems to have in mind and would need a discussion in its own right elsewhere.
critique of history rather an attack on any form of metanarrative—philosophies of history (for example, Kant’s, Hegel’s, Marx’s) or modernization theories (such as those of Max Weber, Elias, Parsons, and Habermas)—rather than the historical discipline itself. He might even be seen as reviving history instead of questioning it. This becomes apparent when one looks at the parallels between Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* and the beginnings of the discipline of history in Germany and considers their common intention.

Johann Gottfried Herder is commonly considered to be the first person to have formulated a radical historicist position, the conception that every age must be viewed in terms of its own values combined with a rejection of the narrative of universal historical progress.18 Herder’s works are a product of the German *Spätaufklärung* (late Enlightenment); he shared the ideals of other Enlightenment thinkers. In his early twenties, however, Herder, a subject of the Prussian king, had lived some years in Riga (then belonging to Russia) and toured through northern and central Europe. This opened his eyes to the multitude of cultures he perceived as different but equal. Starting from this experience, he criticized Enlightenment philosophies of history because their advocates interpreted and judged non-European and past cultures by the norms of the European Enlightenment and believed in universal progress toward these ideals. He ridiculed the arrogance inherent in this position and in their conviction that their century was superior to every other. He countered these ideas by emphasizing the flaws of his own age (for example, by denouncing the way the European colonial powers dealt with non-European peoples), and by articulating the specific strengths and virtues of people from past ages and other parts of the world.

The philosophical basis for this kind of history-writing was Herder’s relativist notion of truth and his critique of reason. He perceived reason as depending on language and culture. Furthermore, he was convinced that history-writing had to be an empirical discipline that could not proceed in an a priori manner, but that had to take all possible fields of life into account: social facts as well as cultural and political ones. Finally, he believed that the aim of every person was *Glückseligkeit* (happiness) and *Humanität* (humanity), and that people of all cultures and ages had been able to live these ideals in their own specific ways. Happiness and humanity were not dependent on the existence of a nation-state. It seemed to him an insult against Creation to think that millions of people in all parts of the world had lived and died solely so that at the end of history their children would receive happiness from European culture.19


19. Despite his good intentions, Herder is a typical example of the European educated elite and its condescending and/or romanticizing ideas about non-European peoples. Living at the courts of provincial Bückeburg and Weimar, this Protestant theologian’s knowledge of the world he wrote about certainly had narrow limits—his chapter on India might serve as an example. However, it also exemplifies his intention to invoke respect for Indian culture and religion. (See Herder, “Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit: Dritter Theil und Vierter Theil,” part III, book 11, chapter IV). Moreover, in his world history, Herder describes an overall development of mankind...
The parallels between this founding idea of the discipline of history and *Provincializing Europe* and the intentions shared by Herder and Chakrabarty in their works are obvious: both have great respect for the ideas of the European Enlightenment and its values, but at the same time both recognize cultural differences and criticize the idea that the histories of peoples all over the world can be adequately described and measured according to a set of European norms. This is why a critique of the grand narratives of the European Enlightenment is central to both of them, and why they conceive of history-writing mainly as an empirical task. In addition, both take the ideal of “equality” seriously and in principle apply it to all peoples of the world at all times. Therefore, they are critical of the Eurocentrism inherent in European metanarratives. Each of them is convinced of the importance of language and, therefore, has a relativist understanding of truth. And both take a skeptical stance toward the self-appraisal and arrogance of some writers of the Enlightenment/modernity and note what is lost on its behalf using a similar measure: the good life. Finally, one could add that both write in a similar situation, that is, from within or on behalf of a country that is perceived as underdeveloped from the point of view of the theories they criticize, but whose intellectuals are strongly influenced by these same theories: Germany in the eighteenth century seemed to be lagging behind the rising Western nations—France, England, and the Netherlands—at least as much as India is perceived to be a developing country nowadays, while the German reading public absorbed and responded to Enlightenment philosophy probably as much as Indian intellectuals read and contribute to discussions of modernism and postmodernism today.  

If one considers these parallels significant, Chakrabarty has to be regarded as a thinker of radical *Historismus* trying to deconstruct the grand narratives of European Enlightenment/modernity rather than as a critic of the discipline of history. *Historismus* here has to be understood in its basic meaning as outlined above: the refutation of histories of progress measuring the whole world according to some European norms only, on the basis of an interest in and respect for difference. What counts is this fundamental principle of historical thinking, and if we want to write a “History on Equal Terms,” we need this principle. Therefore, far from abandoning the Western practice of history-writing, a “History on Equal Terms” essentially has to be an instance of it.

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21. Certainly, I am aware that *Historismus* in general has had bad press at least since the 1970s, and with good reason. For a profound critique of late nineteenth-century *Historismus* and its hermeneutics, see Igers, *The German Conception of History*. According to Igers, the fatal weaknesses of *Historismus* are its aristocratic bias, its methodological one-sidedness, and its philosophy of value (cf. *ibid.*, 269). The aristocratic bias and the methodological one-sidedness are not decisive in this context, because they do not necessarily follow from the basic idea of *Historismus*. However, its philosophy of value does lead to the problem of ethical relativism, which thus is indeed inherent in the concept of *Historismus*. I will return to this problem in part V.
As Chakrabarty asserts, his project of provincializing Europe does not aim at any real geographical or social entity called Europe but at the concepts of political modernity. Yet, although he uses the term “modernity” regularly in Provincializing Europe, nowhere does he clearly define it. Democracy, the rule of law, the narratives of nation-building, the unity of the nation, nationalism, capitalism, industrialization, order, discipline, time regimes, a subject position of the individual self, educational institutions such as universities, the metanarratives of the discipline of history and the social sciences, the conception of a homogeneous time into which all events are translatable, secularization and disenchantment, rationalization, and abstract thought—all of these seem to be understood as characteristically modern. Chakrabarty tells us that most were colonial British imports into India. But he does not systematically develop a picture of precolonial India. In other words, that which was transformed by modernism and, in the logic of the book, would have to be its opposite, remains open to a certain extent. However, he does enumerate some non-modern features: the belief in gods and spirits and their presence in everyday life; barter as an exchange without abstractions; “living labor” and the Eigensinn (Alf Lüdtke) connected with it; heterotemporality; the “traditional;” and the prepolitical.22

This conception of modernity and its use are problematic. First, empirical problems arise with some of the features described as modern. For example, processes of abstraction and homogenization occurred in the ancient world and the European Middle Ages as well, when different systems of time calculation and chronologies were commonly translated from and into Greek, Roman, or Christian chronology. What difference in principle is there between these processes of abstraction and homogenization and “modern” translations into one homogeneous historical time? In all of these cases, we are dealing with the same processes, and only the general concepts of time differ: godly versus secular time. If this example refers to a “modern” practice in the Middle Ages, the same can be found the other way round. Having German history in mind, modernity looks much more irrational and ambivalent than Chakrabarty’s description suggests: just think of the accusations of ritual murder against Jews at the end of the nineteenth century, or of the national-socialistic redemptive anti-Semitism (Saul Friedländer) that had as its core the superstitious conviction that Jews plotted a conspiracy against Germans and that Germany, therefore, would thrive if and only if the Jews were exterminated. Again, on the other hand, the “traditional” religious anti-Judaism in the Middle Ages sometimes had very “modern”—that is, rational—traits, as when Jews were driven out of cities just when influential citizens had high debts. It has been suggested that similar reasoning motivated witch hunts. “Modern” rationality and abstraction thus do not seem to be a prerogative of recent centuries, just

22. Again, Chakrabarty seldom explicitly defines these terms. However, see his use of Guha’s definition of the traditional as something “traditional only in so far as [their] roots could be traced back to pre-colonial times, but [they were] by no means archaic in the sense of being outmoded,” and his explicit reference to barter as a mode of translation “that I have called nonmodern,” in Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 15 and 88.
as beliefs in gods, spirits, and conspiracies are not exclusively “premodern” or “traditional.”

Moreover, the line between Europe as a concept and Europe as a geographical and social entity sometimes seems blurred. To give an example, in his Habitations of Modernity, Chakrabarty gives an affirmative account of Guha’s dealing with questions of power. Whereas Guha describes European power relations, along with Hobson and Foucault, as shaped according to the juridical model of sovereignty, and the notions of discipline, bio-power, and governmentality, he claims for Indian modernity “an extra pair of terms”: domination and subordination established in personal relationships by the use of, for example, physical violence.  

But personal bonds and physical violence certainly are realities in European power relations, too. Just think of the way the Mafia works. Thus, the difference between Europe and India, in this respect, seems to be not so much one of principle than one of degree and maybe visibility, which would have to do with cultural differences in the uses of violence. In his “histories of belonging,” Chakrabarty also takes Foucault’s description of the subject self in the nuclear family and Locke’s outlook on society as factual descriptions of historical reality in Europe with which Bengali history can be compared and in relation to which differences can be marked. The historical accuracy of such theories can be disputed, however. Therefore, finding and establishing specific differences between European and non-European modernities would require not so much a juxtaposition of Bengali empirical research with European narratives of modernity, but rather a comparison of empirical research on both sides. When one does this Europe looks a lot less “European” and precolonial India a lot less “precolonial.”

This criticism does not apply only to Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe. The problem is that the term “modernity” is typically ill-defined, and its conflation with historical reality is inherent in much of the literature on the topic in and outside Europe, especially in discourse-oriented approaches that focus on philosophical or sociological issues, literature, or art. However, thick descriptions of human practices and interpretations question the existence and effectiveness of modern institutions with regard to a large part of European societies until the beginning of the twentieth century or even up to now. Another problem with discourse-oriented approaches is that they often stress the difference between the “premodern” and the “modern” to such an extent that the “traditional” seems to function along different anthropological principles; it becomes the other of modern people and society. This tendency can also be observed in the theoretical parts of Provincializing Europe where Chakrabarty tries to rework the premodern subaltern into a bastion from which to deconstruct the discipline of history, but at the same time, practically excludes the subaltern from society and history.

Therefore, I want to propose a different strategy: first, we should avoid opening up an in-principle hiatus between the “modern” and the “traditional” or the subaltern by questioning its anthropological basis. Then we need to differenti-

ate clearly between theoretical texts and everyday life, comparing empirics with empirics and relating metanarratives with other metanarratives. Furthermore, we should deconstruct the concept of modernity. While the plurality of modernities has to be established from the margins, the deconstructionist work needs to begin at the center: mainly nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy and social science in Europe and the United States. Thus, instead of deconstructing the discipline of history, we need to historicize "modernity" and thereby make room for the plurality of life-worlds.

Such a move does not necessarily deprive us of Chakrabarty’s "indispensable" traits of the metanarrative of modernity: the political use of the term as a normative and analytical tool to underscore demands for social justice and democracy, and to evaluate political measures. This follows from a close reading of Kant's philosophy of history. Kant is of interest for the project of provincializing Europe because of the special consideration he gives to the epistemological status of his ideas concerning the history of humankind. He holds a skeptical position, underlining, first, that his "a priori" world history is concerned with very specific aspects of history only: the development of civil society based on a just constitution, which enables people to use their reason and moral understanding. Second, he does not claim any truth for his ideas about history, but describes them merely as a useful regulatives Prinzip (regulative principle), or a heuristic tool. Third, he attributes a practical status to his philosophy of history: with the publication of his ideas about the progress of humankind toward world citizenship and eternal peace, he wants to convince the ruling elites, for example, to take measures in that direction and hopes to present a guideline with which an attentive public can form its opinion on the progressive/regressive character of political measures.25 Such an epistemologically careful stance toward the validity of Enlightenment narratives of history could save their indispensable (political) aspects without having to deal with their inadequate ones. Moreover, the awareness of the need for a clear circumscription of the limits of such metanarratives opens the field up to a "History on Equal Terms," which I will now outline.

V. HISTORY ON EQUAL TERMS

Chakrabarty strives for a historiography that is not Eurocentric. Such a historiography, he rightly demands, would, in principle, pay the same attention to and expect relevant results from any region in the world, depending only on the focus of research. Research done within the framework of "political modernity" is hardly able to incorporate the qualities he demands because of its teleology, its binary code, and its condescension toward "modernity's" inherent opposite. Chakrabarty therefore proposes a history of the subaltern and calls for the deconstruction of historicism, which he equates with the discipline of history. As I have pointed out, this demand has to be understood against the fact that in the English language the term "historicism" includes philosophies of history and master narratives of

25. Cf. Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht (1784), and with some differences of argumentation in Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taut aber nicht für die Praxis (1793) and Zum ewigen Frieden: ein philosophischer Entwurf (1795).
modernity as well as the founding paradigm of the discipline of history. If one differentiates between the two meanings of this concept, Chakrabarty’s intellectual moves are in fact tantamount to radical historicist thinking. Following this line, I maintain that a “History on Equal Terms” has to be essentially history in the sense of radical Historismus as outlined above: the notion that periods and peoples can only be justly appreciated according to their own standards rather than the norms of a universal narrative of progress. This concept of radical history has to be used to deconstruct the concept of modernity.

Modernity is a philosophical and sociological concept. Its origins can mainly be traced back to Greek philosophy, to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century querelle des anciens et des modernes in France, and to Enlightenment philosophy. But taken in a narrower sense, “modernity” is the founding concept of sociology, a subject emanating from philosophy in a process of specialization in the nineteenth century. At the core of the concept of modernity—and therefore at the center of the social sciences—is the idea of a twofold rupture, one in time and one in space. As Peter Wagner, a social scientist attempting to historicize the concept of modernity, states: first, “the advent of modernity is always assumed to mark a rupture that leads to some specificity of the West in global comparison;” and second, one “can even take it to be the founding assumption of sociology that there was a rupture with earlier modes of social organisation by which societies were put on an entirely different footing.”

This can explain why the term “modernity” in the historical but also in the sociological literature is often used, but seldom defined. The concept of “modern society”/“modernity” relies on a distinction from its opposite, originally the ancient, later on the non-European or savage, and currently the “traditional” or simply “premodern.”

The said ruptures in time and space have been deepened by three intellectual tendencies in the social sciences and in the history-writing that utilizes sociological concepts. The first is a tendency to take theories of modernity for the reality of Western European society. To cite Wagner once again, “Social science tends to conflate the imaginary signification of modernity with the reality of social life in Western societies.”

Second, there is a tendency to homogenize the zone divided from the “rest”—(Western) Europe and the United States since 1800—and thus to ontologize “modernity.” Göran Blix has recently drawn attention to this propensity, in which a selected block of time is totalized as a whole, organic, and internally coherent entity, a zone “bounded in time as countries in space.”

Third, there is a tendency to anthropologize the rupture between the modern and the non-modern. For instance, some sociologists and philosophical anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Arnold Gehlen, explicitly assumed that the transition toward industrial society around 1800 had to be seen as a Kulturschwelle (cultural threshold) comparable only to the agrarian revolution of the Neolithic Age.29


27. Wagner, Theorizing Modernity, 4.


idea of a cultural threshold is implicitly present when the premodern is identified with the prepolitical or with an inability for abstract thought. Finally, the social condition inside the zone—created by the twofold ruptures and their deepening by means of theory, ontology, and anthropology—has been declared superior to every other manner of living.

The problems this intellectual situation presents for a “History on Equal Terms” are easy to recognize: only certain countries and parts of the world are admitted to the said zone—traditionally (Western) Europe, the United States, and Japan—whereas others are generally kept out. Moreover, the rash identification of the countries perceived to be modern with the ideal type of “modernity” developed in theories of modernization leads to a degradation of “the rest” as wholly and essentially non-modern or “traditional.” Unfortunately, the concept of multiple modernities that Chakrabarty and others (including Wagner) propose does not solve these problems. True, it is a way to overcome the rupture in space between Europe and some parts of “the rest,” such as India, and to escape the constant “not yet” there. But, at the same time, there is the danger that it just shifts the rupture in space and establishes it anew with regard to other parts and peoples of the world still seen as “less advanced.” Furthermore, the concept of multiple modernities reinforces the rupture in time by transferring it to other parts of the world. Finally, by saying “we, too, are modern” with the concept of multiple modernities, Chakrabarty still accepts the general goal—modernity—and thus still seems to be trying to keep up with “Europe.” In these ways the notion of multiple modernities unwittingly upholds the idea that modernity is the superior form of living.

Therefore, to be able to write a “History on Equal Terms,” we need to break open entirely the conceptual zoning of the world by de-ontologizing—that is, deconstructing—“modernity.” This project consists of two distinct but interconnected parts: negatively, the deconstruction of the philosophical and sociological concepts of “modernization,” “modern society,” and “modernity,” and positively by the writing of a “History on Equal Terms.” For a deconstruction of the concept of modernity, historians can rely mainly on their own means: the historicization of terms, theories, modes of thought, and scientific paradigms already common in intellectual history or the history of science. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile to look at the deconstructionist moves taken in other subjects. The way archaeologists and prehistorians have handled the Victorian notion of the “ladder of progress” inherent in the Neolithic revolution is a useful guide for refuting the anthropological notion of “modernity.” They now characterize the relationship between foragers and farmers as a “spectrum of activities, with hunting and gathering at one end and intensive farming at the other, rather than a clear-cut division.” It is time for historians to dismiss the modern revolution as the second part of this


Victorian “ladder of progress” in a similar way. Furthermore, historians could use the same logic that postmodern anthropologists have applied to reject “culture” in the noun form, and to question notions of cultural boundaries, as a way to subject “modernity” to a thorough critique.

The demands that a “History on Equal Terms” needs to meet follow from such a critique of the concept of modernity: such a historiography must conceive of history basically as one, avoid fundamental ruptures in time or space, and explicitly acknowledge caesuras as hermeneutic constructions related to leading questions only.\(^\text{32}\) It must clearly differentiate between social reality and the interpretation of this reality in social theory, taking into account, however, that social theory—such as religious, philosophical, political, and sociological thought; the sciences; and general concepts of nature—enables the way people think and act and thus has always influenced social reality.

In the attempt to break up the homogenizing thrust of modernity, historians might be well advised to turn to their colleagues again—this time to sociologists. In reaction to the modernization theories of the 1950s and 1960s—the heyday of the concept of modernity in the social sciences—sociologists have eschewed the valuational component of modernity. Historians could similarly characterize certain social formations, relations, and interpretations as modern—for example, social relations based on money as opposed to inherited rights or personal bonds; authority based on achievement as opposed to ancestry, class, or caste—but without its normative traits. For example, why should the monetarization of social relations per se be good? It has advantages and disadvantages depending on interests and contexts. Thus, “modernity” would be situated on the micro-level of social reality, which would allow for it in all times and places wherever relationships can be found that are defined as modern. It might prove useful to keep such a definition as an analytical tool, but to deconstruct the ontological notion of modernity by pointing to modern features outside the geographical or temporal frame usually reserved for modernity. Moreover, in the context of a “History on Equal Terms,” this might enable us to compare the specific traits, realizations, and developments of relations defined as modern as well as their spread, recession, or transformation. Furthermore, wherever the division of social relations into modern and traditional turns out to be a hindrance—for example, because the relations summed up as traditional are too diverse—one could skip the category modern/premodern and replace it with more precise terminology, and thus become independent of the concept of modernity altogether.

Contemporary sociologists have also brought human agency and language back into social theory. Following their lead with regard to language and agency, a “History on Equal Terms” has to pay heed to actors and their practices, interests, concepts, beliefs, and interpretations. As Michael Adas has pointed out, human actors are the site “where global and local forces, political economy, and symbol systems converge . . . where epistemologies and ideologies clash (and sometimes merge), and where representations, and the essentializing they invariably contain,

most directly affect policy making, strategies of dominance and survival, and decisions for accommodation or resistance."33 A History on Equal Terms interested in this way in a precise description of historical actors and their specific backgrounds will therefore preferably operate on the micro- and the meso-level.

Such empirical research on specific questions re-integrates Western and non-European history on an equal basis. Modern and non-modern social relations can be found inside as well as outside Europe: just think of nineteenth- and twentieth-century housewives in Europe and the United States, whose situation was premodern in some respects, as opposed to the modern condition of sixteenth-century Indians involved in trade with East Africa. Seen from this angle, the differences between “modern societies” and “traditional” or “developing” societies are differences not in principle but in degree. Whether a person’s living situation can be characterized as “modern” or “traditional” depends on a range of factors, including gender, age, status, occupation, and his or her particular social, cultural, and economic location.

In principle, this kind of non-Eurocentric empirical research can follow three patterns: diachrony, synchrony, or entanglement. Combinations of these are possible as well. It can focus on long-term processes, usually subsumed under the concept of modernization, like globalization, democratization, scientification, empire and nation-building, secularization, and urbanization. These terms do not necessarily possess the above-mentioned disadvantages of the concept of “modernity.” On the contrary, comparative research on such processes in different regions of the world is a field of study that sometimes already provincializes Europe. In the case of urbanization, for example, it points out that the future of urban agglomerations, at the moment, can be observed in the metropolises of Latin America, Africa, and East Asia, rather than in European cities. Such processes must not be turned into teleology, however. As Hartmut Lehmann has recently proposed with regard to secularization, this process may well be a—reversible—European Sonderweg.34 A comparison of social phenomena and events—such as domination and subjugation, family structures, political murder, and the imagination of society or the nation—also lends itself to a non-Eurocentric history. While both these approaches regard their objects as independent entities, a “History on Equal Terms” can furthermore focus on the links and interdependence among processes and events of a political, social, cultural, or even biological nature. Just like the history of processes and comparative historical research, such an approach can be pursued independently of the “silent referent Europe”: depending on the research questions, any region of the world can become the object of study in an equal manner.

Moreover, a “History on Equal Terms” needs to be founded in an anthropology without ruptures, whose idea of the human species is open enough to make room for historical variation. The philosophical anthropology of Helmhuth Plessner may be a starting point. Whereas Chakrabarty describes abstract thought or homelessness, for example, as specifically modern, Plessner considers them to be general


human traits that can be explained in terms of the *exzentrische Positionalität* (eccentric positionality) of individuals—their ability to distance themselves from themselves—which implies their *konstitutionelle Heimatlosigkeit* (constitutional homelessness) as well as their ability to think in abstract terms. Speaking of the prepolitical in such a perspective does not make sense at all because phenomena of power are necessarily involved wherever people live together in large numbers, and these phenomena are what constitutes the political. To be able to write a “History on Equal Terms,” we need such a basic anthropology, open to the contingencies of history and able to bridge the millennia since the constitution of *homo sapiens sapiens* in all parts of the world.

Plessner’s anthropology might help in another respect, too: with the question of ethics. A “History on Equal Terms” needs a clear concept of human dignity, which gives historians a position from which to judge ideologies and political systems like National Socialism and the Third Reich. *Historismus* with its relativist notion of reason and norms renders any such position impossible. This is where Chakrabarty’s dilemma with the inadequate yet indispensable traits of Enlightenment narratives originates. Helmhuth Plessner, a pupil of Max Weber, was astutely aware of the implications of *Historismus* for European thinking. It was impossible for him to ignore its insights and return to a static rationalistic ethics. However, writing in the Germany of the Weimar Republic and in exile during the Third Reich, Plessner just as perceptively realized the danger of radical subjectivism and ethical nihilism. In fact, he had warned of the political radicalism on the left and right to which they gave room, from the early 1920s on. George Iggers, analyzing this philosophical and political situation in his *German Conception of History*, arrived at the same conclusion. He claimed that a constant element in human nature needed to be found that might serve as a basis for norms such as human dignity on which political claims and judgments could be founded. Plessner’s philosophical anthropology was supposed to achieve exactly this: acknowledging the insights of *Historismus* and recognizing its political dangers at the same time, he wanted to give humanistic political thought the philosophical basis classical liberalism lacked when faced with *Historismus*. A “History on Equal Terms” principally finds itself in the same intellectual circumstances today. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to ascertain how far Plessner’s approach can take us.


“Modernity” and modernization theories are not purely academic matters. Far from being relevant only to the analysis of the past, the concept of “modernity” is central to the self-definition of the Western world today. That an attempt to deconstruct modernity would be politically charged is obvious: as far as we can tell from Western media, it is modernity that Islamic terrorists are targeting when they attack the World Trade Center, trains, subway stations, and hotels, and according to official pronouncements, it is the achievements of political modernity that the United States and Europe are defending. The zoning of the world and the ruptures between the West and Westernizing countries, on the one hand, and the rest, especially the Arab world defining itself partly as a place of resistance against the modernization process, is evident. Moreover, modernization theories deeply shape contemporary Western expectations for the future. According to Peter Wagner, it “is an understandable desire of human beings to be able to predict the future. . . . The former theory of industrial society claimed to know that ‘modernisation’ was the direction of history, and convergence of societies would be its outcome.”38 Since the heyday of industrial sociology, the social sciences have refrained from making this claim. However, the belief that modernization is the direction of history lives on in popular thought: “[President Bush] has argued from the start that a modern, liberal, democratic Iraq would be an example, an inspiration and a spur for progress in the Middle East. . . . Bush recognized that the roots of Islamic terrorism lie in the dysfunctions of the Arab world. Over the past 40 years, as the rest of the globe progressed economically and politically, the Arabs moved backward.” This Arab phenomenon “is likely to be cured only by a more open and liberal Arab culture that has made its peace with modernity.”39 According to this comment by Fareed Zakaria, editor of Newsweek International—a comment that stands for many others—the embracing of modernity by all people in all parts of the world, but especially in the Arab countries, is a legitimate reason for war and a precondition for world peace at the same time. The concept of modernity thus seems to be one of the, if not the, most powerful and influential concepts today, shaping vital political expectations and decisions. Every attempt to deconstruct modernity has to bear that in mind.

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38. Wagner, A History and Theory of the Social Sciences, 166.