



University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require a subscription.

Author(s): Gurminder K. Bhambra

Article Title: Historical sociology, modernity, and postcolonial critique

Year of publication: 2011

Link to published article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/ahr.116.3.653>

Publisher statement: © Bhambra, G. K. (2011). Historical sociology, modernity, and postcolonial critique. *The American Historical Review*, 116(3), pp. 653-662.

AHR Roundtable
Historical Sociology, Modernity, and Postcolonial Critique

GURMINDER K. BHAMBRA

MODERNITY IS ONE OF THE CENTRAL CONCEPTS of sociology, with sociology itself frequently understood as emerging as a modern form of reflection upon associated historical processes.¹ The sociological understanding of modernity typically rests on ideas of the modern world emerging out of the processes of economic and political revolution located in Europe and underpinned by the cultural changes brought about by the Renaissance, Reformation, and Scientific Revolution. Such an understanding conflates Europe with modernity and renders the process of becoming modern, at least in the first instance, one of endogenous European development. Coterminous with this argument is the idea that the rest of the world was external to these world-historical processes and that colonial connections and processes were insignificant to their development.

While historical accounts of the two revolutions—and, by implication, of modernity itself—have not remained unchanged over time, what has remained constant has been the historiographical frame—of autonomous endogenous origins and subsequent global diffusion—within which these events are located. This frame, or grand narrative, is Eurocentric in character, and it is this which remains in place even when the particular histories within it are contested. Not only have “others” not been recognized as constitutive of the canonical “twin revolutions,” but the potential contribution of other events (and the experiences of non-Western “others”) to the historical-sociological paradigm has rarely been considered. As Steven Seidman remarks, sociology’s emergence coincided with the high point of Western imperialism, and yet “the dynamics of empire were not incorporated into the basic categories, models of explanation, and narratives of social development of the classical sociologists.”²

This has begun to shift somewhat in the light of postmodernist and poststructuralist claims. Since the 1960s and 1970s, knowledge claims in the social sciences and humanities have been under pressure from the rise of subaltern positions and an explicitly recognized politics of knowledge production that has questioned the

I would like to thank Mia Rodriguez-Salgado, David Arnold, John Holmwood, and the *AHR*’s anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

¹ The detailed demonstration of the arguments in the first two paragraphs is contained in Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke, 2007).

² Steven Seidman, “Empire and Knowledge: More Troubles, New Opportunities for Sociology,” *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no. 3 (1996): 313–316; see also Gurminder K. Bhambra, “Sociology and Postcolonialism: Another ‘Missing’ Revolution?” *Sociology* 41, no. 5 (2007): 871–884.

possibility of objective knowledge.³ This pressure has been expressed in terms of suspicion toward positivist explanatory paradigms and their presumed associations with power, with a shift from causal explanation to reflexivity, deconstruction, and interpretation, and with arguments for the necessary demise of grand narratives. Postcolonial scholarship has similarly been integral to the opening out and questioning of the assumptions of the dominant discourses.⁴ If we now understand dominant approaches as Eurocentric, it is because of new voices emerging in wider political arenas and in the academy itself. The end of colonialism as an explicit political formation has given rise to understandings of postcoloniality and, perhaps ironically, an increased recognition of the role that colonialism played in the formation of modernity. These developments, associated generally with “the cultural turn,” have provoked a paradigm shift within many disciplines in the social sciences and in the humanities more generally. Within sociology, the cultural turn, in relation to understandings of modernity, is manifest in two broad approaches: third wave cultural historical sociology and the multiple modernities paradigm.

Third wave cultural historical sociology is defined by its attempts to historicize understandings of modernity, that is, to examine the diverse, complex histories that are regarded as embodying and constituting modern transformations.⁵ There is an explicit move away from earlier forms of historical sociology, which were concerned with issues of causal explanation, to, as Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff suggest, a more “genealogical” project “associated with the formation of historically evolving cultural categories and practices.”⁶ In this way, third wave cultural historical sociology merges with cultural history. It offers up a diversity of now-disaggregated histories in which Eurocentric history is decentered, but the more difficult issues associated with the grand narratives of (European) modernity are not addressed. This leaves the standard narrative of modernity intact as the implicit grand narrative within which these disaggregated histories are necessarily located. The multiple modernities paradigm similarly emerges from a context in which the pressure to include other histories can no longer be avoided. Unlike third wave cultural historical sociology, this paradigm does address the grand narrative of modernity, but it hardly reconstructs it.

Multiple modernities emerged as a distinct research paradigm in the late 1990s.⁷

³ See John Holmwood, “Sociology and Its Audience(s): Changing Perceptions of Sociological Argument,” in John Eldridge, John MacInnes, Sue Scott, Chris Warhurst, and Anne Witz, eds., *For Sociology: Legacies and Prospects* (Durham, N.C., 2000), 33–55; and George Steinmetz, ed., *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others* (Durham, N.C., 2005).

⁴ See, among others, Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London, 1978); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago, 1988), 271–313; Spivak, “Post-structuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value,” in Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory Today* (Cambridge, 1990), 219–244; Gyan Prakash, “Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1475–1490.

⁵ See, for example, Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff, eds., *Remaking Modernity: Politics, History, and Sociology* (Durham, N.C., 2005); and Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999).

⁶ Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff, “Introduction: Social Theory, Modernity, and the Three Waves of Historical Sociology,” in Adams, Clemens, and Orloff, *Remaking Modernity*, 43.

⁷ It was developed by both historians and sociologists, and its particular theoretical exposition was

The failures of earlier modernization theory were deemed to be self-evident by this time—with limited convergence and homogenization apparent in the world—and modernization theory had also been under attack, largely by Third World theorists of development and underdevelopment. In differentiating multiple modernities from modernization theory, scholars argued that two fallacies, in particular, were to be avoided. The first is that there is only one modernity, and the second is that looking from West to East necessarily constitutes a form of Eurocentrism.⁸ The argument being put forward is that while the idea of one modernity, especially one that has already been achieved in Europe, would be Eurocentric, theories of multiple modernities must nonetheless take Europe as the reference point in their examination of alternative modernities.⁹ Theorists of multiple modernities, in defending the dominant approach to comparative historical sociology, accept that Eurocentrism has been a problem that has sometimes distorted the way in which modernity has been conceived, yet they also argue that Eurocentrism cannot be denied as “fact,” that, put simply, the European origins of modernity cannot be denied. However, it is precisely this “fact” that is denied when global interconnections are recognized.¹⁰

Theorists of multiple modernities sidestep the issue of global interconnections by theorizing modernity as being constituted by institutional frameworks operating together with cultural codes. This division enables the former to be understood as that which is common across the varieties of modernity—and thus allows all types of modernity to be understood as such—while the latter, being the location of crucial antinomies, provides the basis for variability, and thus multiples of a common modernity. By maintaining a general framework within which particularities are located—and identifying the particularities with culture and the experience of Europe with the derivation of the general framework itself—theorists of multiple modernities have, in effect, neutralized any challenge that a consideration of other histories could have posed.¹¹ Thus theorists of multiple modernities seek to contain challenges to the dominant theoretical framework of sociology by not allowing “difference” to make a difference to the original categories of modernity.

Simply pluralizing the cultural forms of modernity, or recognizing the histories of others, does nothing to address the fundamental problems with the conceptualization of modernity itself, a conceptualization that remains intact in third wave cultural historical sociology as well as in the approach of multiple modernities.

undertaken by Shmuel Eisenstadt in conjunction with a core group of European historical sociologists. Eisenstadt held the unique position of having been a key theorist in the elaboration of modernization theory in the 1960s and was now central to its rethinking as a theory of multiple modernities. See S. N. Eisenstadt, “Transformation of Social, Political, and Cultural Orders in Modernization,” *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 5 (1965): 659–673; *Early Modernities*, Special Issue, *Daedalus* 127, no. 3 (1998), including Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter, “Introduction: Paths to Early Modernities—A Comparative View,” 1–18; and *Multiple Modernities*, Special Issue, *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000).

⁸ Eisenstadt and Schluchter, “Introduction.”

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *The Eurasian Context of the Early Modern History of Mainland South East Asia*, Special Issue, *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 735–762; Tarak Barkawi, “Connection and Constitution: Locating War and Culture in Globalization Studies,” *Globalizations* 1, no. 2 (2004): 155–170; Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*.

¹¹ Arif Dirlik, “Global Modernity? Modernity in an Age of Global Capitalism,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 6, no. 3 (2003): 275–292; Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*.

Within the discipline of history, the response to these paradigmatic shifts in the wider academy is, in this first instance, different. However, there are also crucial similarities with the developments in sociology—similarities that provoke a reconsideration of the relationship between sociology and history.

POSTMODERN CRITIQUES HAVE HAD most effect in those disciplines that orient explicitly to the notion of temporal and spatial rupture contained within understandings of modernity, and indeed could be argued to be structured by such understandings. Both sociology and anthropology, for example, conventionally locate their object of study on either side of the tradition-modernity divide and, with the collapse of grand narratives and the assumed dissolution of this divide, have been beset by legitimation crises around the constitution of their object of study.¹² History has managed to avoid such a crisis, in part because there has been no disciplinary imperative to locate its object of study on one side or the other of this divide. History takes as its object the entirety of the past and has responded to postmodern criticisms, in the main, by expanding the remit of the “particularities” it admits.¹³ The proliferation of studies beyond the traditional histories of states and monarchs began in the 1960s and 1970s with the turn to social, feminist, and subaltern histories, and the discipline did not require much persuasion then to include cultural and post-colonial histories.¹⁴ That this proliferation has not led to the same kind of fragmentation or internal division found within sociology and, to a lesser extent, anthropology can be attributed to its coalescence around the idea of historical method. History, for many, is a form of scholarly engagement that brings historical evidence and material to bear upon interpretations such that even where those interpretations may be contested, interlocutors can find value in the new evidence that is brought to light. Georg Iggers refers to this as an “expanded pluralism” in which new histories may jostle for space on the curriculum, but they do not necessarily represent themselves as posing a methodological challenge to the dominant mode of scholarly inquiry as such.¹⁵ As a consequence, the collapse of grand narratives, and the turn to cultural history, is more easily absorbed by a discipline that is ecumenical in terms of how it constructs, and locates, its object of study.

The cultural turn in history, then, has given rise to two seemingly paradoxical manifestations. One is the turn to microhistories, and the other is the turn to global history.¹⁶ While the former, with its rejection of grand narratives and its focus on

¹² For further discussion of disciplinary cultures, see Michèle Lamont, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 53–106.

¹³ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Post-modern Challenge* (Middletown, Conn., 1997); Lamont, *How Professors Think*.

¹⁴ Early examples include E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963); Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (1978; repr., New York, 1987); and Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1982). For a discussion of some of the historiographical debates surrounding such shifts in the focus of the historical enterprise, see M. J. Rodriguez-Salgado, “Dust and Ashes: The History of Politics and War,” in John A. Marino, ed., *Early Modern History and the Social Sciences: Testing the Limits of Braudel’s Mediterranean* (Kirksville, Mo., 2002), 145–168.

¹⁵ Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, 144.

¹⁶ See Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It,” trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 10–35; David Northrup, “Globalization

cultural phenomena, fits easily within any characterization of the cultural turn, global history would appear to be at odds with it. To the extent that global history takes seriously the injunction to consider “others” in its elaboration of the global—specifically postcolonial others—the influence of the cultural turn can be recognized.¹⁷ In this sense, microhistories (with their discovery of new, previously obscure, events in places already studied) and global histories (with their discovery of new, previously obscure, histories of other places) can be seen to have similar characteristics. And it is this characteristic of identifying “the new,” without reconstructing the “old” paradigms within which these new histories are to be located, that is of concern here.

Given that historians do not necessarily have to take a position with regard to grand narratives within standard practices of “history-making,” then, in the context of microhistories it is easier still to sidestep any contentious issues arising from the cultural turn more generally. These microhistories present the historical endeavor in terms of recovering history, and cultural meaning, from the fragmentary and the previously obscure, and in so doing they often adapt anthropological methods to historical research.¹⁸ Criticisms of positivism, of the oppression of explanations, of the silencing of other voices—all can be avoided by refusing to explain, by simply deconstructing and interpreting. While they may explicitly eschew grand narratives, this does not mean that their research exists outside of such narratives. As Barbara Weinstein demonstrates in her consideration of three cultural histories, they are rarely able to discard an underlying explanatory framework in the presentation of their research.¹⁹ What occurs, she suggests, is that the grand narrative is so thoroughly embedded in the cultural frameworks within which historians operate that it no longer even requires explicit acknowledgment; it is present, instead, “as the historian’s ‘common sense.’”²⁰ This “commonsensical” narrative is also at play within global history, with the standard understanding of modernity, as emerging endogenously in Europe and subsequently diffusing across the globe, central to framing research in this area.

The cultural turn, and postcolonial critique more specifically, prompted historians to engage more thoroughly with parts of the world beyond Europe and the West. This was manifest in developments associated with the rise of world history and in the subsequent new global history. One dominant strand of world history, as David Christian argues, has been the attempt to construct a singular history of the

and the Great Convergence: Rethinking World History in the Long Term,” *Journal of World History* 16, no. 3 (2005): 249–267; and Barbara Weinstein, “History without a Cause? Grand Narratives, World History, and the Postcolonial Dilemma,” *International Review of Social History* 50 (2005): 71–93.

¹⁷ This is especially so in the context of teaching; in the U.S., there has been increased discussion of the general “Western Civilization” course and an attempt to broaden its parameters by, in some places, transforming it into “World History.” For discussion, see Gilbert Allardyce, “Towards World History: American Historians and the Coming of the World History Course,” *Journal of World History* 1, no. 1 (1990): 23–76.

¹⁸ Weinstein, “History without a Cause,” 74–75; see also Ginzburg, “Microhistory”; and Andrew Willford and Eric Tagliacozzo, eds., *Clio/Anthropos: Exploring the Boundaries between History and Anthropology* (Stanford, Calif., 2009).

¹⁹ Weinstein, “History without a Cause,” 75–78. Richard Biernacki makes a similar point when he writes that even Clifford Geertz, a key source for the cultural turn, could not avoid making “seemingly ‘causal’ claims about the way culture works”; Biernacki, “Method and Metaphor after the New Cultural History,” in Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 72.

²⁰ Weinstein, “History without a Cause,” 77.

world that is more than simply “a collection of the particular stories of different communities.”²¹ Beyond an encyclopedic endeavor to document all the histories of peoples in the world, what is needed is a particular narrative to bring these histories within a coherent structure. The issue in this conception is less about discovering new histories about others, more about ordering them. As William H. McNeill wrote in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of World History*, “Data exist; what is needed is to gather and bring them to order and then construct a clear and elegant discourse with which to present the different facets and interacting flows of human history as we now understand them.”²² The discourse in this case is, quite explicitly, the rise of the West. This, incidentally, is also the title of McNeill’s 1963 magnum opus, upon which he was reflecting “after twenty-five years,” and in his consideration of the earlier claims, he wrote that while his personal idiosyncrasies may have led him to look at “history from the point of view of the winners,” we must nonetheless acknowledge that point of view and “admire those who pioneered the enterprise and treat the human adventure on earth as an amazing success story, despite all the suffering entailed.”²³ Questions of who this “we” consists of, and whether “we” must celebrate the successes (of some) despite the suffering (of others), formed the nub of post-colonial, and other, criticisms.

A structuring arc was believed to be necessary in world history in order to give coherence to what otherwise would have been simply a collection of particular histories, but it was not clear what that structuring arc could be, except for some version of the “rise of the West” grand narrative. Other suggestions, such as “the evolution of freedom” or “modernization,” were similarly regarded as problematic because of their construction of world history as the offspring of European/Western civilization.²⁴ One alternative, posed by Andre Gunder Frank, was for a history that would be structured around “the world *system* and the historical *process* of its development.”²⁵ To the extent that “development” was generally considered in terms of expansion outward from an initial transformation, that of feudal Europe into a capitalist world economy, world-systems theory can be understood as following the usual trajectory of Europe to the world, which is regarded as problematic. Further, its emphasis on economic structures made it difficult to accommodate “culture” within its analyses or to recognize that “others” had a history prior to European incursions.²⁶

With the identification of a singular narrative being regarded as problematic for a variety of reasons but the criticisms of a descent into simple fragmentation holding, there was a call in the mid-nineties by Michael Geyer and Charles Bright for something different. They argued that world history needed to recognize that it operated

²¹ David Christian, “World History in Context,” *Journal of World History* 14, no. 4 (2003): 438.

²² William H. McNeill, “*The Rise of the West* after Twenty-Five Years,” *Journal of World History* 1, no. 1 (1990): 20–21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ See Allardyce, “Towards World History.”

²⁵ Andre Gunder Frank, “A Plea for World System History,” *Journal of World History* 2, no. 1 (1991): 6; see also Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1974) and *The Modern World-System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750* (New York, 1980).

²⁶ See Lauren Benton, “From the World-Systems Perspective to Institutional World History: Culture and Economy in Global Theory,” *Journal of World History* 7, no. 2 (1996): 261–295.

in “an age of globality” and to work to recover the “multiplicity of the world’s pasts” in order to make sense of the new processes of “global integration and local differentiation” associated with globalization.²⁷ With this, they mirrored the shift in sociology with critiques of modernization theory, prompting the move to a conception of multiple modernities. Indeed, they argued that world history needed to be structured around the conception of “an integrated world of multiple and multiplying modernities,” which required “critical reflection and historical study.”²⁸ An important development in the studies that followed was a reconsideration of the “rise of the West” narrative to take into account local dynamics elsewhere.²⁹ These histories often established similarities in economic conditions globally and offered convincing alternatives to the standard explanations rooted in notions of European uniqueness. Gale Stokes suggests that this new scholarship has attempted to sidestep the older controversies associated with the question of “why Europe?” to address questions of polycentric interactions and material advances through comparative history on a global scale.³⁰ While these histories have, for the most part, moved away from evaluating the break in terms of a civilizational imperative, to the extent that they continue to frame their discussions in terms of responding to a break or rupture that requires explanation in its own terms, the question of “why Europe?” remains implicit in their analyses. The trail laid by Max Weber in seeking to determine the causes of the miracle of Europe has been adapted by subsequent scholars attempting to account for the miracle in Europe.

World history has been supplemented (or contested?) in recent years by the emergence of the new global history, which takes institutional expression in the *Journal of Global History*, established in 2006. There is little consensus on what, precisely, constitutes global history as distinct from world history, and many scholars regard it as a variant of, or even a synonym for, world history, while others believe it to be completely antithetical to it.³¹ My concern here is not with this debate. The aim of the new journal, in the words of its editors, is to subject processes of globalization, contemporary and longstanding, to “more historical treatment.”³² Global history, for

²⁷ Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, “World History in a Global Age,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 4 (October 1995): 1042, 1058.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1058.

²⁹ See, for example, R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J., 2000); Jack A. Goldstone, “Efflorescences and Economic Growth in World History: Rethinking the ‘Rise of the West’ and the Industrial Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (2002): 323–389; Maxine Berg, “In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 182, no. 1 (February 2004): 85–142; Raymond Grew, “Review Article: Expanding Worlds of World History,” *Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 4 (2006): 878–898.

³⁰ Gale Stokes, “The Fates of Human Societies: A Review of Recent Macrohistories,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (April 2001): 508–525. Goldstone, for example, suggests that “there is no universal or European ‘modernity’ for the world to adopt or combat; rather there is a particular strand in European culture, engine science,” that other cultures have adopted, and adapted, to a greater or lesser degree. This is then presented as constituting the multiplicity of modernities that are present in the world. Goldstone, “Efflorescences and Economic Growth in World History,” 376.

³¹ For debate, see Bruce Mazlish, “Comparing Global History to World History,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 3 (1998): 385–395; Maxine Berg, “From Globalization to Global History,” *History Workshop Journal* 64 (2007): 335–340.

³² William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Peer Vries, “Editorial,” *Journal of Global History* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1.

them, is not necessarily about taking the whole globe as the framework of analysis, but rather involves “straddling traditional regional boundaries and proposing innovative comparisons.”³³ In a similar vein to Geyer and Bright, the editors highlight the inadequacy of the grand narratives of the “rise of the West” and the “Westernization of the rest,” and argue that historians need also to examine other cultures and histories. At the same time, however, they seek to maintain the importance of the Western past “in framing global contrasts and interpretations.”³⁴ Their recognition of the need to include others, then, occurs simultaneously with their desire to maintain the Western-inspired framework within which these others are to be located.

The arguments for global history in the short editorial are complemented by a longer article by Patrick O’Brien that further serves as a manifesto for the new journal (and the new movement?). O’Brien, in sketching out the prospects for global history, hopes that the metanarratives of the twenty-first century will “leave behind more than two millennia of historical writing designed to proclaim and validate” the superiorities of particular civilizations, but fears that it will take longer to move on from narratives preoccupied with “Western achievements in science, technology, economic organization and warfare.”³⁵ While he argues for the necessity of a cosmopolitan scholarship in our global times, he believes that it must be one that avoids “the fishy glue of Eurocentrism,” and he is cautious regarding the move to reclaim indigenous ways of understanding the past for fear that such an approach leads back “into deplorable varieties of myths supporting chauvinism and ancient ‘centrism.’”³⁶ In other words, while we have to move away from “ancient centrism,” Western processes are to remain central, and given his arguments against critiques of Eurocentrism or other ways of knowing the past, Western methodologies are also to retain their central status.

The difficulties posed in the endeavor to write a global history without lapsing into a “rise of the West” narrative are not faced only by historians in the West; they are also apparent in historiographical debates located primarily in other parts of the world. In his discussion of the world history project in China, for example, Luo Xu writes that the first organized attempt was made in the late 1950s, with the first

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Patrick O’Brien, “Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History,” *Journal of Global History* 1, no. 1 (2006): 32. This is borne out in a rudimentary analysis of the articles published in the new journal from the inaugural issue in 2006 to November 2009. There were four volumes with three issues each, resulting in a total of sixty-nine articles (not including editorials, review essays, or book reviews). Of these articles, ten can be said to be based on rethinking the standard narratives framing understandings of global history; that is, they directly challenge the simple association of modernity with Europe and seek to provide an alternative framework within which to conceptualize the new data. The remaining fifty-nine articles maintain the narrative of European modernity subsequently globalized, or variations on this theme. In terms of topics covered, thirty—just under half of all articles published—are on some aspect of trade, commerce, or industry; twenty-five are on “new” historical examples or the discovery of forgotten histories; nine are on individuals in global context; and six are on historiography.

³⁶ Ibid., 33, 36. For a critical discussion of the possibilities of reclaiming indigenous ways of knowing and understanding without falling into “ancient centrism” or myths of chauvinism, see, among others, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ed., *Another Knowledge Is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies* (London, 2007); Robbie Shilliam, “Keskidee Aroha: Translation on the Colonial Stage,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24, no. 1 (2011): 80–99.

official text being published in 1962.³⁷ This text, he suggests, followed the stages of development as they had been universalized in Soviet historiography, and as these had been drawn from European historical experience, the Chinese interpretation was itself Euro-centered.³⁸ The 1980s saw a reevaluation of the field with attempts made “to reconceptualize and reconstruct world history ‘with Chinese characteristics,’” that is, to avoid Eurocentrism, but, he argues, “the reconstructed text followed the same old way of compiling world history—Europe as the center and others as peripheries.”³⁹ As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, the prevalence of “Europe” in structuring histories elsewhere is not unusual; rather, it is “a part of a much more profound theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced in the third world.”⁴⁰

ONE OF THE KEY ASPECTS of the cultural turn, and postcolonial criticism more specifically, has been the critique of Eurocentrism and grand narratives. Four different responses from sociology and history have been considered here—third wave cultural historical sociology, multiple modernities, microhistories, and global history—to demonstrate how all four approaches work within the grand narrative of European modernity as a structuring frame even when this is not explicitly acknowledged. Third wave cultural historical sociology and microhistories, for the most part, avoid a direct engagement with the problems associated with grand narratives generally and the aspect of their Eurocentrism more specifically. They turn their focus instead to the micro, the cultural, and the particular. In doing this, they allow the grand narrative of European modernity to remain in the background and thus leave the problems associated with it untouched. The approach taken by theorists of multiple modernities and global historians is different, but has a similar outcome. They acknowledge the Euro-centered nature of the previous paradigms but seek to solve the problem by simply pluralizing within a general framework that itself remains unchanged. The mode of deconstruction, to which these developments are responding, enables one to ignore that which one does not wish to engage with, or to multiply examples of otherness without requiring those examples to challenge what had previously been thought. What is needed, instead, is a new moment of reconstruction after the cultural turn—a moment of reconstruction that brings sociology and history back together through historical sociology.

The widening remit of historical research to include cultural and postcolonial

³⁷ Luo Xu, “Reconstructing World History in the People’s Republic of China since the 1980s,” *Journal of World History* 18, no. 3 (2007): 325–350.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 326. See also Nicola Spakowski, “National Aspirations on a Global Stage: Concepts of World/Global History in Contemporary China,” *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 3 (2009): 475–495.

³⁹ Xu, “Reconstructing World History,” 326–327, 338.

⁴⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 29. Indeed, some historians have argued against the very enterprise of global history and strongly urged a renewed focus on national history as a consequence. Toyin Falola, for example, argues that it is the weaker countries that are being asked to subsume their national histories, their particular histories, to an overarching global history predicated on the national narratives of powerful Western countries. In his account, as global history is seen as a “transitional narrative” to globalization, the space for African voices is lessened. Falola, “Writing and Teaching National History in Africa in an Era of Global History,” *Africa Spectrum* 40, no. 3 (2005): 499–519.

histories has extended the data available to macrohistorians and sociologists alike. The “newly discovered” histories, however, were not previously lost; rather, they were associated with activities that were not seen as significant within prevailing accounts but cannot now be recovered as simply additional to them.⁴¹ To address their contemporary significance, a more thoroughgoing critique is needed, one that goes beyond deconstruction, or a simple “expanded pluralism,” to the reconstruction of dominant paradigms. In this sense, reinterpretations of history are not just different interpretations of the same facts; they also bring into being *new* facts. These new facts should cause us to rethink our accepted frameworks of explanation, which have often been established on the basis of much narrower histories. In so doing, they also transform the meaning of preestablished facts whose status as facts (and also for whom they are facts) is brought to light. The facts and interpretations that support standard ideas of European modernity, for example, are countered by a growing body of literature that presents alternative interpretations and contestations of those “facts.” The weight of such arguments is sufficient to suggest that an alternative to the grand narrative of “European modernity” is both plausible and likely to be productive of new insights about historical and social processes. De-linking our understandings of such processes from a European trajectory and focusing on different sources and roots and the ways these interacted and intersected over time would provide us with richer understandings of the complexities of the world in which we live.⁴²

The task that postcolonial criticism asks us to consider, then, is to rethink modernity in the context of this new data and to develop paradigms adequate for a global age in which the global is now understood as the *condition* of the modern world, not its *consequence*. In this way, the challenge is perhaps greater to sociology than to history, a challenge to reconstruct the conceptual architecture of the discipline and its hitherto foundational understanding of modernity.

⁴¹ See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995); and Maghan Keita, “Africa and the Construction of a Grand Narrative in World History,” in Eckhardt Fuchs and Benedikt Stuchtey, eds., *Across Cultural Borders: Historiography in Global Perspective* (New York, 2002), 285–308.

⁴² Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories”; on “delinking,” see Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 449–451.

Gurminder K. Bhambra is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Social Theory Centre at the University of Warwick, where she has taught since 2007. She is author of *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), which won the 2008 Philip Abrams Memorial Prize, awarded by the British Sociological Association for the best first book in sociology. She is co-editor of three volumes: *Silencing Human Rights: Critical Engagements with a Contested Project* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), *1968 in Retrospect: History, Theory, Alterity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), and *African Athena: New Agendas* (Oxford University Press, 2011). She is currently working on the implications of postcolonial perspectives for historical sociology.