

SUBJECTS OF MODERNITY



TIME-SPACE, DISCIPLINES, MARGINS

AUTHOR

SAURABH DUBE

Subjects of Modernity – Time-space, disciplines, margins

Originally published by Manchester University Press. Republished with permission.

Published by AFRICAN SUN MeDIA under the SUN PRESS imprint
All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2017 AFRICAN SUN MeDIA and STIAS

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic, photographic or mechanical means, including photocopying and recording on record, tape or laser disk, on microfilm, via the Internet, by e-mail, or by any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission by the publisher.

First edition 2017

ISBN 978-1-920689-99-5

ISBN 978-1-928357-45-2 (e-book)

DOI: 10.18820/9781928357452

Set in Arno Pro 12/14

Cover image by Savindra Sawarkar

Cover design and typesetting by AFRICAN SUN MeDIA

SUN PRESS is an imprint of AFRICAN SUN MeDIA. Academic, professional and reference works are published under this imprint in print and electronic format. This publication may be ordered directly from www.sun-e-shop.co.za.

Produced by AFRICAN SUN MeDIA.

www.africansunmedia.co.za

africansunmedia.snaplify.com (e-books)

www.sun-e-shop.co.za

The STIAS series

The Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) was born from a simple but powerful conviction: in this part of the world special initiatives are required to create and maintain an environment where we can generate and engage with conceptual frameworks and knowledge that may guide us in tracking and co-shaping global academic developments and that will allow us to address the ‘big’ questions and issues South Africa and the African continent face, also in a global context.

STIAS has been moulded in the tradition of Institutes for Advanced Study across the globe. It distinguished itself by encompassing all disciplines from the natural to the social sciences and humanities (with a particular emphasis on research grounded in multi-disciplinarity), by maintaining a focus on the African and South African context, and by striving towards contemporary relevance, also by actively creating avenues for communicating the results of its research projects to a wider public.

The STIAS series publications are thus aimed at a broad public which will naturally vary with specific research themes. Straddling the academic world and the forum of an engaging public is a challenge that STIAS accepts; we trust that each STIAS publication will reflect the ‘creative space for the mind’ in which it is rooted, stimulate public interest and debate, and contribute to informed decision making at various levels of our society.

Further information about STIAS and its research programme may be found at www.stias.ac.za.

Hendrik Geyer
STIAS Director
Stellenbosch
June 2011

stias
PUBLICATION

For Anna
a book of her own

CONTENTS

List of figures	i	
Foreword	iii	
Preface	v	
<hr/>		
1	SUBJECTS OF MODERNITY: AN INTRODUCTION	11
	Primary matters	12
	Key questions	13
	Critical concerns	16
	Unravelling orientations: the postcolonial and the subaltern.....	17
	Historical anthropology.....	21
	Pathways.....	22
	Notes	25
<hr/>		
2	INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: TIME AND SPACE	31
	Early encounters	32
	Apprentice engagements	37
	Journeyman entanglements.....	40
	Latter-day enmeshments	46
	Notes	49
<hr/>		
3	MAPS OF MODERNITY: ANTINOMIES AND ENTICEMENTS	57
	Overture	58
	Abiding antinomies	60
	Untangling modernity	65
	Distinctions of modernity	69
	Other moderns	71
	Coda	75
	Notes	75
<hr/>		
4	DISCIPLINES OF MODERNITY: ENTANGLEMENTS AND AMBIGUITIES	91
	Anthropology and time	92
	Ethnography and temporality: key protagonists	95
	History and culture	101
	Anthropology: ambiguities and reconfigurations	103
	History: ambiguities and reconfigurations	107
	At the end	111
	Notes	112

5	MARGINS OF MODERNITY: IDENTITIES AND INCITEMENTS	119
	Untangling identity	120
	Colony and empire	123
	Pasts and communities	127
	Nation and modernity	130
	Coda	133
	Notes	134
<hr/>		
6	MODERN SUBJECTS: AN EPILOGUE.....	139
	Overture	140
	Genealogies.....	141
	Formations	144
	Emergences	147
	Coda	148
	Notes	151
	Bibliography	153
	Index	153

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Savindra Sawarkar, “Untouchable, Peshwa in Pune,” etching, 35 × 29 cm (reproduced with kind permission of the artist)	84
Figure 2	Savindra Sawarkar, “Untouchable with Dead Cow,” dry-point, 26 × 19 cm (reproduced with kind permission of the artist)	85
Figure 3	Savindra Sawarkar, “Untitled 0.9,” dry-point, 36 × 28 cm (reproduced with kind permission of the artist)	86
Figure 4	Savindra Sawarkar, “Devadasi with pig voice,” drawing on paper, 20 × 26 cm (reproduced with kind permission of the artist)	87
Figure 5	Savindra Sawarkar, “Introspecting Buddha,” line drawing, 23 × 30 cm (reproduced with kind permission of the artist)	88
Figure 6	Savindra Sawarkar, “Pregnant Devadasi with upside-down Brahman,” mixed media on paper, 18 × 18 cm (reproduced with kind permission of the artist)	89



FOREWORD

Contestations of modernity cover the historical and cultural origins of the phenomenon while questioning understandings of “the modern condition” itself. This erudite and beautifully argued book encompasses both elements in its carefully crafted prose and analysis. *Subjects of Modernity* takes modernity as its subject and also enables those subject to modernity to be heard. This should not come as a surprise, however, as the author, Saurabh Dube, is himself located at the intersections of critical historical scholarship and an engaged anthropological tradition sensitive to the voices in need of amplification.

Subjects of Modernity takes on the disciplinary mappings of this key concept through a fresh consideration of the times and spaces of modernity, as well as examining the marginalised intimacies that inhabit its various forms. Drawing on the traditions of postcolonial thought, subaltern studies, and historical anthropology – and the artistic reflections of Savindra Sawarkar – Dube develops a nuanced deliberation of the academic and aesthetic trajectories of modernity. At the same time, he opens up new considerations of identities formed by and through such movements.

The broader empirical terrain covered by the book extends the scope for the reinvigoration and renewal of the associated concepts, categories, and paradigms of modernity. This is a renewal that enables us to rethink what we understand of, and with, modernity and ideas of the modern (subject). In this way, the book clearly illuminates one of the key concerns of the Theory for a Global Age series, that is, the call for the concurrent engagement of deep analysis with theoretical reconstruction. Dube not only presents a lucid account of the “subjects of modernity,” but accounts for those subjects in diverse and innovative ways. It is powerful, politically engaged scholarship at its best.

Gurminder K. Bhambra
University of Warwick



PREFACE

Subjects of Modernity was conceived in maculate ways.

Stellenbosch is a beautiful town, held as though in a glass bubble. It is caught in an uncanny warp, a vortex even, of snarled space and twisted time, which turn upon each other. Stellenbosch is set amid the hills of the Cape Winelands, a mere fifty kilometers or so from the haunting (and haunted) Cape Town. The stunningly gorgeous region, which produces some of the finest wines in the world, has been home to slavery, indenture (formal and informal), apartheid, and what followed. It was in these terrains – which embody the contradictions of modernity, articulate the contentions of modernity, and express the contingencies of modernity – that this book was born.

Late in the Antipodean winter of 2013, I was a fellow for three months at the spectacular Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, commonly known as STIAS, aka the “Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Salads,” something of a measure of the local envy for the place. My principal project there had begun as a history and

anthropology of my high-school class in New Delhi, only to expand into something wider, a curious account of contemporary India. The critical archives for the project were the digital recordings of conversations with my cohorts, collected as part of my “homework” (not mere fieldwork, for we are speaking of school here). These were contained on my laptop computer, a rather raggedy machine yet one with sufficient memory. Enthusiastic and excited about working through the recordings, I had begun to settle into the rhythms of STIAS and Stellenbosch.

But then, the laptop was gone. It had been filched from our heavily secured apartment, provided by the Institute, in central Stellenbosch. The deed was done on a weekend. We (my partner, Ishita, and I) were out for the day with friends driving around the coast of the Western Cape. On a whim we had gone to Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of the African continent, which is actually strangely uninspiring, at least at deepening dusk. After losing our way in the dark – and nearly colliding with an enormous porcupine – our bedraggled party of four returned home late at night to discover something amiss: an overturned vase, a flowerpot askew, the immense dining table out of place, yet little that was obviously missing, except the tiny computer.

The pilfering had been quite a production. While locking up everything carefully, we had forgotten about a loose slat on a side window blind in the living room. It was this sliver that had been forced open, a thingamajig improvised from a long broom handle and wires lying in the patio had been used to pull the humongous and heavy dining table toward the window, and the laptop lifted. There was nothing else gone. The arrival of the Falstaff-like Stellenbosch police constables at midnight, and of the smart detective from Paarl the next day, are tales within tales best reserved for another time.

For all the effort, what had the thief gained? Did not a laptop with an operating system and keyboard in Spanish – in a principally Afrikaans- and Xhosa-speaking part of the Cape – seem a little pointless, whether for sale or as an acquisition? Even assuming the innards of the machine were unknown to the pilferer, why had its power supply, plugged in next to the window and thus terribly easy to pick up, been left behind? It all seemed very peculiar, beyond strange, until the concierge of the swishy hotel in front of our apartment block told us that the theft was not business as usual: no, not at all.

Rather, the laptop had been taken on a weekend that was ritually significant. It was at that time of the year, in those days, that Cape Coloured young women aged fourteen to sixteen were initiated into girl gangs, after a spectacular derring-do. The child, if I may, had pulled off the incredible, considering the weight of the table, the modus operandi, and the security/surveillance all around her. The

theft of a computer with research materials on my cohort, intimating privilege and entitlement, led to a ritual initiation into a colored cohort, inhabiting vulnerability and worse. Here was testimony to the necessarily split yet ever entangled nature of modernity.

Now I was at a loose end, at least by way of a research and writing project at STIAS. Yet I was also footloose and fancy-free. Through long rambles in pretty Stellenbosch, disparate bits that had been delivered as parts of talks and published as segments of essays, which had inchoately indicated a book ahead, now began to fall into place. For a work that approached modernity as being constitutively contradictory, thinking it through on Stellenbosch Mountain proved particularly productive. Here was a sentinel that gazed out toward the vineyards and valleys of God's own country, yet a spectator that stood mute testimony to the formative violence that was sown into the spirit and substance of the soil – here, there, and everywhere in sight. My endless long walks, communing with this magic mountain, have shaped *Subjects of Modernity*.

None of this should suggest a latter-day, postcolonial habitation of Walden Pond. Far from it, I was insinuated in the excitement that was STIAS, its existence of words and worlds, spirit and flesh – at long lunches, seminar sessions, wine receptions, and impromptu dinners. For all of this (and much more), I acknowledge the good denizens of the Institute, who are thanked ahead. Amid these scenes was the inimitable Athol Fugard, ethereal but immanent, floating yet grounded. He touched me with even more than his acute wit and immense wisdom. Alongside him, the anarchic aesthetic – comprising art, life, and friendship – of Aryan Kaganof made me live many lives in a handful of moments.

Actually, Stellenbosch Mountain was made incarnate for my companion fellows at STIAS – in 2013, as in spring 2014, when I visited again for a week – as we went for walks into its lap and embrace. During the first visit, as I climbed up with Walter Mignolo, one of the scholarly protagonists who is to be encountered ahead (especially in Chapter 2), he proclaimed while looking down at the green pastures and lush vineyards, “This is amazing, like Switzerland or something.” To which I could not contain my retort, since it echoed the mountain: “The incredible whiteness of being, Walter, the incredible whiteness of being.”

It followed, too, that my last meeting with Stellenbosch Mountain in 2014 produced twin tales. Through the long, rigorous hike, almost everyone, especially the runners, smiled or waved back at me. All the while, from the middle of a forest, a strange sound, human yet eerie, haunted my communion. It is the smiles and the strangeness (and the joy and the horror), ever together, which bid goodbye to me from Stellenbosch Mountain, that make modernity so compelling. As William Mazzarella

puts it, “Only those ideas that compel our desire as well as our resistance receive and deserve our most sustained critique.”

While the lineaments of the work were clear, *Subjects of Modernity* had to be substantiated, made of the world, as it were. From the earliest days through to the immediate present, senior scholars and brilliant editors, who are also friends, have supported and provoked me. In no particular order, let me thank here Sharad Chari, Michael Herzfeld, David Brent, John Comaroff, Debjani Majumdar, Ajay Skaria, Ken Wissoker, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. No less salient has been the belief and friendship of my former research assistants, Eduardo Acosta and Lucía Cirianni, who are surely on their way to becoming formidable scholars.

This book was destined to find place in the Theory for a Global Age series. Its editor, Gurminder Bhambra, has been an extraordinary presence: forceful and forthright, decisive and supportive, imaginative and sharp, quick and critical. Having read the final version of the manuscript, there was a key question that she put to me gently, concerning the absence of women authors in the text, as distinct from the notes. The question turns on the politics of gender, citation, and knowledge – taken together – and I would like to respond to it, as a tiny token, too, of the fabulous editorship and graceful friendship that Gurminder has provided me.

On the one hand, citational economies structure discipline(s) and knowledge(s), often reproducing male, racial, class, caste, ethnocentric, and hetero-normative privileges. And the struggle for the opening up of the academy, as part of wider endeavours against entitlement, has to precisely query such citational structures and practices. On the other hand, if the struggle is shifted principally to the arena of citational economies, it is that distinct “margins” and “minorities” not only simply cite each other – and maybe a few other intersecting critical ones – but can do so in ways that tend to mirror the exact hierarchies they are questioning, albeit on alternative terms. If there are resonances here of Joan Scott’s “only paradoxes to offer,” it is equally the case that also overlooked is the exact embedding of the academy in the wider force fields of power and privilege, which shore up, structure, and toss around the university. I hope it is clear that mine is not a clarion call for a more truly radical struggle out there, somewhere – although it would help if academics joined democratic struggles (wider and immediate) with a greater sense of modesty – and much more a suggestion toward querying carefully the hierarchy, privilege, and entitlement in which the tenured professoriate is embedded. To interrogate entitlement and privilege is to unlearn privilege and entitlement, laughing hard, especially at oneself. In relation to the vexed matter of citational economies, this can mean finding different, critical ways of writing.

Now, authors, works, and perspectives that are “minor” and “marginal” in the academy have featured prominently, if distinctly, in my previous writings – always alongside more certified critical doxas and radical traditions – most of which I draw upon as well as question. (Polemic has never been my strong point and, besides, it has little place in the sort of work that I do.) However, this book adopts a particular tack in its style of argument, writing, and citation. As I critically engage dominant delineations of subaltern, decolonial, and postcolonial studies as well as of modernity, anthropology, and history, all of which I learn from yet carefully question, especially attentive to their underenunciated and little-appreciated meanings and resonances, it is more male protagonists than women authors (although there are some) that appear in the text. At the same time, the critical doing and undoing of these understandings, disciplines, and knowledge(s) is embedded in the notes, where women and men, non-Western and Western, black and white crucially sustain the heavy lifting. On offer, indeed, is an entangled interchange between the text and the note, which allows me narrative continuity in the former (text) alongside the securing of arguments in the latter (note). Of course, this is only a tiny, provisional incision in a dense corpus of questions. But then, we must try to repay our debts.

I do not know how successful I will be in even attempting the task of repaying debts as I return to the formative site in the making of this book, STIAS, and the people who populated its magnificent environs and graceful sensibilities. Again, in no particular order, I thank Hendrik Geyer (and his wry humour); Duncan and Tracey F. Brown (“Yes, I have had my water,” T and D); Christofer R. and Carina G. Edling (and Carl, Tove, and Axel); Edgar Pieterse and family (for lessons in imagination and struggle); and – considering friendship, warmth, stimulation, and care – Karin Brown, Bernard Lategan, Gudrun Schirge, Gerhard Mare, Christoff Pauw, Philippe Van Haute, Leonard (Lenny) Katsokore, Gladys Lechini, Ryland Fisher, Maria Mouton, and Maggie Pietersen.

The materials and arguments that shore up this book have been presented at talks, conferences, and seminars – in institutions too numerous to mention here – spread across Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Germany, India, Mexico, Singapore, Taiwan, the UK, and the US. I thank the organisers, participants, and interlocutors on those occasions. Needless to say, such prior transcripts, quite like previous publications (for all of which I hold the copyright), which intimated *Subjects of Modernity* stand transformed in their new avatar, their second coming. The editors and designers at Bloomsbury and Manchester University Press, and AFRICAN SUN MeDIA have facilitated the final version. I offer my sincere thanks.

At the end I move (closer) toward home. Miraculously, Savi Sawarkar came back into our lives as this book was being finalised. His art and warmth, friendship and

persona have not only taught me how to listen to what pictures want, what images desire, but have provided me with lessons on life, history, and theory. I am grateful to him also for allowing me to reproduce the images that appear in the middle of this book.

Ishita Banerjee-Dube has been around, as always, shoring up my worlds while listening to every new paragraph as it was written, also providing me water and sustenance along the way. Needless to say, without her this book could not have been imagined and articulated a year after the death of my mother.

Prior generations pass and newer ones come around. Earlier this year, I wished happy birthday to Anurati Tandon, whom I had seen when she was quite the babe in arms, only a few months old. By way of a gift, it seemed to me, dedicating *Subjects of Modernity* to her might be in order, an apposite gesture. And so this book is dedicated to a modern subject who is also a subject of modernity, Anurati Tandon or, simply, Anna.

Kolkata/New Delhi/Mexico
March 2016



I

SUBJECTS OF MODERNITY: AN INTRODUCTION

This book explores modernity, the disciplines, and their interplay by drawing in critical considerations of time, space, and their enmeshments. Based in anthropology and history, and drawing on social-political theory (as well as other, complementary, critical perspectives), it focuses on socio-spatial/disciplinary subjects and hierarchical-coeval tousel temporalities. My effort is to carefully consider the oppositions and enchantments, the contradictions and contentions, and the identities and ambivalences spawned under modernity. At the same time, rather than approach such antinomies, enticements, and ambiguities as analytical errors or historical lacks, which await their (eventual) correction or (inexorable) overcoming, *Subjects of Modernity* attempts to critically yet cautiously unfold these elements as constitutive of modern worlds. The work's affiliation with distinct borderlands and its acknowledgment of the production of time and space by subjects, social and disciplinary, play a crucial role here.

To adopt such an apparently oblique, ostensibly elliptical, perspective on modernity is not only to interrupt the long-standing, straightforward storylines of the

phenomenon, it is also to query routine portrayals of homogeneous time (that are yet founded on inaugural, spatial ruptures) and antinomian blueprints of social space (which nonetheless entail a singular temporal hierarchy), each one binding the other. Needless to say, such projections undergird the frequently formalist and often a priori representations of modernity which abound in our present. Together at stake in this book are efforts to explore modernity as a contradictory and checkered historical-cultural entity and category as well as a contingent and contended process and condition. That is to say, on offer is an understanding of modernity as acutely construed by social-spatial/disciplinary subjects *and* as crucially defined by heterogeneous-coeval hierarchically ordered temporalities. As we shall see, all of this shores up, as well, what the work might contribute to discussions of modernity after so much has been said and written about the subject.

Primary matters

It warrants emphasis that the conditions of possibility for this work lie in a series of critical questions concerning modernity, history, and the West/Europe, which have been raised by distinct perspectives in recent decades.¹ I indicate three such sets of queries here.² The first set concerns vigorous challenges to univocal conceptions of universal history under the terms of modernity. Imaginatively exploring distinct pasts that were forged within wider intermeshed matrices of power, such emphases have questioned pervasive imperatives of historical progress and the very nature of the historical archive, both intimately linked to aggrandising representations of a reified (yet palpable) Europe/West.³

Second, for some time now, critical scholarship has contested the enduring oppositions – for example, binaries between tradition and modernity, ritual and rationality, myth and history, and East and West – that have shaped influential understandings of the past, key conceptions of culture(s). On the one hand, such theoretical interventions have derived support from critiques of a subject-centered reason and a meaning-legislating rationality, critiques that have thought through the dualisms of Western thought and post-Enlightenment traditions. On the other, critical discussions of cultures and pasts have equally challenged the analytical antinomies of modern disciplines, interrogating essentialised representations of otherness and querying abiding projections of progress, which are variously tied to the totalising templates of universal history and ideological images of Western modernity.⁴

Third, close to our times, dominant designs of a singular modernity have been increasingly interrogated by contending intimations of heterogeneous moderns. Such explorations have critically considered the divergent articulations and discrete representations of the modern and modernity, which have structured and