Occidentalism

Modernity and Subjectivity

Couze Venn

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INTRODUCTION

This book has been long in the making. It has been constantly interrupted by other projects that have fed into it so that it has mutated over time. One thing has remained constant through these explorations, namely, the aim of interrogating modernity from the standpoint of a postcoloniality that knows itself to be caught up in the history of modernity, inflected by its discourse, yet conscious of the need to disrupt the limits and the limitations which the modern now signifies. These limits exist at both the discursive and the historical levels, since they operate at the level of modernity's self-understanding inscribed in the discourses that articulate its intelligibility, as well as at the level of the lifeworlds that have been constituted in the course of its history. My task has been one of finding critical spaces for engaging with that reality, spaces from which the question of what is to come after modernity converges with the question of the postcolonial. The stakes in breaking out of the limitations concern the possibility of imagining radically different forms of sociality in the moment of the 'post'.

I will begin with a brief explanation of the project indicated in what I have just said. At the level of theory, two series of analyses that have framed the critique of modernity are central to my approach. On the one hand, from the 1960s the spectrum of critiques collected under the sign of poststructuralism has targeted the discourses that have authorized modernity as a project, interrogating the foundational concepts and narratives which underwrote it, like those of the logocentric subject or of History as the linear and progressive unfolding of a *telos*. These critiques, in recognizing the epistemological and ethical violences that have shadowed the institution of modernity, have increasingly been directed towards the question of the ethical basis of a post-Enlightenment ethos, particularly in the work of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Ricoeur, Levinas, elaborating a number of themes which phenomenology, from Husserl, had started to bring to the surface.

On the other hand, the critique of colonial discourse and modernity which has now been assembled in something called postcolonial theory has ended up addressing the same issues about foundational and authorizing concepts that the problematic of ethics trails in its wake.[1] Stuart Hall (1996b), a pivotal figure in this convergence, whose work weaves together cultural and postcolonial studies, defines the postcolonial in terms of 'thinking at the limits', that is to say, an analytical approach which keeps 'under erasure' the concepts and theories that one must borrow from the

discourses of modernity whilst engaged in their critique. Such an attitude to theory cannot avoid a constant vigilance about the grounds of knowledge, and thus it cannot avoid putting into question the epistemological, ethical and aesthetic enframing of modernity as a project.

This heretical analysis requires that, for strategic purposes, one is able to locate oneself at the edge of existing paradigms, in an in-between discursive space from which one may perceive the figures of the 'figurants', as Derrida might put it. My search is thus for a way of narrating the present, a genealogical discourse that, in its refiguration of modernity, indicates a way out of the present. I am therefore not concerned with sociological accounts that propose models of development that point to the structural determinations of modernity – for instance, the possible structured–structurizing relationships between the economic and the social – or analyses that trace the mutations of modernity, by reconstructing its articulation, first, with mercantile capitalism, then with industrial and consumer capitalisms and the cultures affiliated with these forms. The summaries of the main positions regarding a sociology of modernity in Hall and Gieben (1992) and Hall et al. (1992) show clearly enough the problems intrinsic to the variety of models on offer from the classical analyses of Durkheim, Weber and Marx to the more recent departures of, say, Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992). It has become more and more difficult to assert directions from the claims of structural relations. Instead, my question about modernity concerns the meaning of the 'post'-as-limit from the point of view of a narrative that changes the present.

My own path through these developments has been to establish the specificity and uniqueness of the institution of modernity by reference to two themes, namely, the contribution of the New World as condition of possibility for its emergence, and, by reference to a longer genealogy of the questions about being that the discourse of modernity addressed, arguing that the specificity of the answers that it has elaborated is bound up with the history of colonialism and capitalism. Occidentalism, from that point of view, is the conceptual and historical space in which a particular narrative of the subject and a particular narrative of history have been constituted; these have become hegemonic with modernization, having effects throughout the world because of the universal scope of the project of modernity and the global reach of European colonization. The book breaks with that conceptual space, that is to say, it breaks with the privilege of epistemology, with subject-centred ontologies and psychologies, and with the mutation of occidentalism recently into a performative modernization underwritten by neo-liberalism and the instrumentalisation of reason. It tries to dislodge from post-Enlightenment philosophical discourse a number of critical elements that enable one to indicate a discourse of being which opens towards a different postmodernity, a transmodernity, one which is the correlate of a postcoloniality to come.

A great deal of material, developed in the course of teaching and thinking, invisibly remains in the background of my critique of modernity. For

instance, I have over the years compiled a dossier of events relating to what used to be called the 'Third World', assembled from newspaper cuttings, specialist magazines, Amnesty International reports, and so on, letting them stand as evidence of the incredible inhumanity which characterizes everyday reality in postcolonial times. I keep it within my sight for much the same reasons that medieval scholars kept a skull, namely, as a memento, in my case, of the inadequacy of language, particularly theory, to encompass the unspeakable horror which is committed daily in the name of profit, efficiency, order, modernization, oppressive power and its maintenance. Gradually, the dossier has included events from everywhere, so that the 'Third World' could no longer be contained within the older colonial space; the relationship of the global and the local became deterritorialized. Edward Said established some time ago that colonial discourse was not just about the discursive construction of the colonized 'other' but that it was intrinsic to European self-understanding, determining how Europe and Europeans could locate themselves – as modern, as civilized, as superior, as developed and progressive – only by reference to an other that was represented as the negation of everything that Europe imagined or desired itself to be. Today, similarly, the postcolonial world is present everywhere, but it is filtered for the 'West' through the representational devices of consumer culture and the tourist gaze, or it is relocated by the conceptual suppositions of development theory and of modernization such that it can still appear outside or peripheral, either beyond the concern of everyday calculations or dispersed in the generalities of globalization theory; often the post-independence countries appear only as the place of catastrophe. A central intention in this book is to make present this presence, to demonstrate its effects at the heart of the postmodern critique of modernity.

Another corpus of material which has been formative concerns the exploration of questions of identity, widely dispersed, existing in a variety of forms, from academic writing to novels and films and music, questions which I have addressed elsewhere – for example in Venn (1993) and (1999) – but which I have had to leave in the shadow of the more general problem of subject-formation. Equally, it would not have been possible for me to focus on the point of view of historicity and temporality in my elaboration of a critical phenomenology had people like Vattimo (1988), Lacoue-Labarthe (1990), Grosz (1994), Critchley (1997), Wood (1988), Osborne (1995) and many more, gone some way in preparing the ground in their reflections on some of the key texts that I have put to work here. It goes without saying too that the collaborative work I have done with the co-authors of *Changing the Subject* (Henriques et al., 1984), excavating the ground of psychology and of psychoanalytical thought, has shaped a good deal of what appears here without being explicitly addressed. As we know, it is easier to 'think at the limits' when one knows one is simply taking a few steps further along paths that others have already cleared out.

The disadvantage in my approach is that those who have not ventured along similar roads may think that too much is taken for granted or left

unsaid in my analyses. I have but two excuses for this neglect, namely, that it would have required a much longer work to do justice to the wealth of material, and that the trajectory I have indicated has led me to the conclusion that the challenge to the foundational narratives of modernity cannot avoid the focus on the core theoretical issues. The problem of the subject has appeared intrinsic to this interrogation for two reasons, namely, because what is articulated at the heart of the founding narratives of every epoch are the forms of subjectivity that it engenders, and because the problem of the reconstitution of the colonial subject has been central to postcolonial questioning, as my analysis will make clear. The focus on the question of foundation and on the question of a different theorization of subjectivity has meant that the approach in the book has taken a philosophical turn, even if limited to the conceptual framework of post-structuralism and selected figures.

The work of Foucault has been important in this trajectory, surprisingly so, since he has little to say directly about the (post)colonial in spite of his interest in the Iranian issue. I deal with this neglect in Chapter 4, reading it symptomatically to bring out the invisibilities in the way that the Enlightenment formulates its problematic of the subject and its project of the emancipation of humanity, invisibilities reinscribed in Foucault's refiguration of the question which motivated the Enlightenment in terms of who we are in the present and in terms of a critical ontology implicating an ethics and an aesthetics of being. What is immediately relevant is the fact that his analysis of modernity directed attention to the effects of power inside the very process of intellectual labour, so that claims to knowledge could no longer shelter behind the epistemological defences of objectivity, but had to acknowledge the locatedness of knowledge within stratagems of power, and so reveal its hand. Truth in the social sciences could thus be refigured in terms of regimes of truth and of the instruments for instituting the particular forms of sociality which theory theorizes. In the course of his elaboration of these problems, Foucault has demonstrated something about modernity, namely, its historical specificity and its conditions of possibility, thus its contingent character, which enables us now to stand back from it and interrogate it from the standpoint of an emergent counter-narrative, no longer seeing in modernity the inevitability of a process of historical unfolding.

Yet when one thinks about modernity in the light of recent debates, what is striking is the astonishing success of the now suspect modernist ideas about history and subjectivity, and about the mechanisms and causes of stability or development in human societies. Of course, today, it is possible to invoke the fact of European colonialism and Western imperialism and the achievements of capitalism and of technocratic reason to find, however retrospectively, reasons for the triumph of modernity, particularly in its occidentalist form. My approach is to consider a longer genealogy of the subject (and of humanity) within which to locate modernity, in order to allocate to it a different measure, one that cannot be returned to its own

criteria for judgement. This requires a number of strategic discursive deterritorializations. I would begin with the argument that modernity derived its appeal from and was instituted on the promise of a solution to questions that are rather more archaic and fundamental than the objectives of the progress of reason and the advancement of society on the basis of rational calculation and planning. These questions concern the existential realities which all cultures have faced in their own way, to do with finitude, and lack and loss, and the peculiar, indeed uncanny, ungrounded character of our beingness or dwelling in the world. Before the modern period, religion, or, more generally, discourses with a claim to a sacred foundation, was the privileged terrain in which people sought to still the anguish immanent in the human condition and to anchor ontological security. The discourse of modernity, in proposing the possibility of human beings taking charge of their own destiny on the basis of secular narratives of emancipation, owing nothing to the erstwhile fateful forces of nature or to the mysteries of a transcendent divine will and a vagrant destiny, ensured that ontology and epistemology took the place of theology and metaphysics. By the time of the Enlightenment, epistemology, however troubled by Kantian hesitations, had come to be the privileged terrain upon which were displaced all the questions concerning who 'we' are and what is to be done. The age of Reason, or rather a particular understanding of the rational, became at once enshrined and validated in the success of the sciences and the technological miracles which they made possible.

Reason has another, less illustrious, but equally central, function in the story of the success of modernity. From the time of its refiguration within the Cartesian problematic of the subject, it functioned to consign the colonized and women, the propertyless and non-white peoples to the status of inferior beings, delivered to the violences of oppressive and exploitative power. This is a more complicated story than the tale told from the point of view of a hasty anti-rationalism or anti-modernity. To tell it, one needs to set the scene differently, to defamiliarize expectations. The first chapter begins this process.

The political and the theoretical problem today is that in the wake of the developments and transformations in the last twenty years or so we no longer know for sure how to make sense of the reality of the world as we find it. Some would even call into question the notion of reality itself, correctly challenging the pretensions of realist representation, but incorrectly claiming dispensation from the obligation to judge, on the grounds that the subject of knowledge is so thoroughly inscribed in the stratagems of discourse that there can be no neutral or uninvested ground for deciding between competing genres of discourse. Discourse, however, is not outside the political or the ethical. The idea that one cannot judge because we are all inscribed in discourse – or indeed because there is 'nothing outside' the text, forgetting Derrida's (1999) own strictures about the implications for relativism – is itself a legacy of the privilege of the epistemological instance in the philosophical discourse of modernity. The reasoning seems to be that of claiming

that if there can be no unimpeacheable, objective ground for truth – the protocol demanded by the epistemology intrinsic to modernity – then there can be no truths in the first place. Nostalgia for epistemological certainty and a degree of abjection for the modern subject have combined to produce a self-indulgent chatter. Time was when we were accustomed to the thought that there were a number of grand truths to which we could hold on in the security of unshakable foundations. Had we not been assured that progress in every domain was possible, even inevitable? Were we not certain that 'History' proceeded according to well-understood patterns or laws, and that scientific thought would find answers to every mystery? Were we not convinced that we were the masters of our own destiny, in spite of being burdened by circumstances and by the weight of history? Later, we rejoiced with equal certainty in the death of a number of ideas, like the Subject, History, Humanism, ideas that swiftly joined others in the big cemetery of discarded transcendentals. Then we learned with some anxiety to question our own questioning, balancing anxiety with the excitement of the possibility of a ludic nomadism of identity and of theoretical practice. If in doubt, credibility could always be restored by making a certain kind of deconstruction the name of the game. In any case, playful irony could be counted upon to get us out of any uncomfortable situation.

Meanwhile, the debris of history has kept piling up, which makes us fear for the future and question our responsibility. New names of disasters, like ex-Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Algeria, Afghanistan, Chile, have joined those like Auschwitz and the Gulag, names of the Disappeared everywhere that have derailed the lofty ambitions of the project of modernity. Already, to reduce to the symbolism of proper names the suffering of Auschwitz and its contemporary metonymies, or the injustice of the Disappeared, damages our ability to confront the unrepresentability of the injustice done to countless named persons. To all this, one must add the list of the familiar and routine examples of inhumanity: chronic famine, abject poverty, the uprooting of those who do not fit for ethnic or economic reasons, and the extermination of tribes because they are in the way. If we were to include the damage done by every manner of pollution and the environmental destruction caused by cynical over-exploitation or ignorance, we would have a picture of inhumanity and catastrophe that should stop us in our tracks when we contemplate the wonders of the cybernetic world or the miracles promised by biotechnology, genetic engineering and nano-technology.

Furthermore, other narratives have surfaced, mutating from pre-modern metanarratives, to compete with the grand schemes which once legitimated the project of modernity as the one that should prevail universally. For example, religious and ethnic fundamentalisms make similar claims to universal validity and are as totalizing in their reach. The appeal of fundamentalism must be set against the *agon* of the 'we' – the people, the nation, and, at another level, humanity – the ideological signifiers that had functioned to authorize political action, a 'we' that the failures of the project of

modernity and of 'development' reveal to have been riven by inequalities of power and wealth. The fundamentalisms of today are modern recastings of older traditional and religious discourses, preserving their mythic dimension, but conditioned by the experience of modernization, including the mass media and military technology. Indeed, fundamentalism's claims to derive its authority or legitimacy from the purity of an unblemished tradition forgets the extent to which its discourse is so conditioned. In some cases, say with Zionism and varieties of fundamentalist Christians, the authority of scientific rationality is recruited to validate claims about race or about psychological processes. Other narratives include scientist and 'New Age' grand theorizations and visions, whether grounded in genetics and biology as in varieties of socio-biology, or in less tangible occult forces in the case of New Age discourse. They imagine an implicate and over-arching order in the world which makes sense of events and gives meaning to human existence.

It could be argued that, faced with this Benjaminesque vision of the angel of history terrified by the sight of humanity in ruins, it would be less messy to close the book outright on the episode of modernity rather than sift through the rubble. Yet if we wish to turn our face towards the future, we cannot afford the innocence of born-again post-isms that will have forgotten the conditions that institute the present. For a start, a term like 'post' implicates a concept of periodization – as linear and developmental, proceeding through ruptures or transformations, and so on – which modernity itself invented. If every discourse finds its place in relation to a particular stream of questioning that locates its contingency and conjuncture, then there can be no privileged site, called either postcoloniality or postmodernity, from which truth can declare its authenticity. This is not simply a matter of reflexivity, which some people would like to think of as specifically postmodern; it is an aspect of the historicity of discourse. We need, in any case, to ask ourselves who will testify and bear responsibility for what has been done. What lessons should we take with us to avoid repeating past errors and excesses as we follow a new direction? Are we not inheritors of the found world and carriers of the same temptations, inscribed in that world, which have driven previous generations to seek transcendent destinies in spite of the cost in terroristic forms of sociality?

My point is that, one way or another, the discourse of modernity, with all its ambivalences, is far from being a spent force. Besides, in spite of the intimations of postmodernity, the term 'modernization', recently repackaged in political and managerial rhetoric, still has the power to command submission to its authority or its claims to good sense. It increasingly functions in the service of goals that its own occidentalist logic decrees. By this I mean something more than what Lyotard (1984) said about legitimation in postmodern times. We recall that his analysis highlighted how the commodification of knowledge within an economy of capitalist exchange, together with the uncoupling of a narrative of legitimation grounded in ethical judgement from a narrative establishing claims to truth, has resulted

in a self-referential, performative system for the instrumental determination of the means for and the ends of human advancement. Within this system, the criterion of efficiency, measured according to the logic of instrumental rationality, enshrined in the performativity of a technocratic and economistic *techne*, has become the norm for judgement about desirable ends. My contention is that to the coupling of a despotic reason with the logic of capitalist accumulation one must add the force of colonialism and imperialism in overdetermining the development of a hegemonic discourse of modernity which has left behind both the ethical priority in the emancipatory ideals of Enlightenment and the memory of the physical, psychological and ontological violences that have shadowed the making of the modern world. It relates to the process of the becoming-West of Europe and the becoming-modern of the world that I am calling occidentalism. Thus, occidentalism refers at once to the space of intelligibility of a triumphalist modernity and to the genealogy of the present as a history of the transformations that have in the course of time instituted the forms of sociality and the lifeworlds that inscribe occidentalism. As I indicated earlier, this book is about the disengagement from the conceptual terrain of occidentalism and the disentanglement from the discourse of modernity of a number of elements that, relocated outside occidentalism and its affiliates like egology and phallogocentrism, hold out the possibility of not repeating the violences intrinsic to it.

The triumph of capitalism coupled to the failures of Stalinism have, for the moment, silenced the narratives of a socialist alternative. A variety of social movements have appeared, like radical ecology and communitarian projects on the fringe of administered society, but they remain marginalized or subject to recuperative tactics whenever their appeal rekindles some humanitarian value, as with some varieties of green politics.[2] In the 'Third World', uprisings – for example, the Zapatista in Mexico – constantly face overwhelming military and economic power. The greatest obstacles to fundamental change exist in the form of the terroristic, semi-criminal forms of power that now operate, sometimes in the guise of the 'state', locking whole populations in cycles of exploitation and oppression. Then there are the obstacles in the mind, namely, habitual ways of thinking materialized in the lifeworld, feeding into the poverty of mass political culture. The general will today is a ventroliquist will, its autonomy is but the effect of a specular sleight-of-hand. The emasculation of 'public man' (Sennett, 1976) goes hand in hand with the priority of the private world and the privatization of fulfilment alongside the privatization of responsibility and care. A mafioso capitalism has spread, in networks and folds, recognizing no responsibility for anyone, laying claim to the future, whilst an army of apologists and 'realists' are busy working out the ways of legitimizing or living with it.

The problems that we now face require other investigations. At the theoretical level, I would indicate the critique of value, the critique of the new economy of power, and the critique of knowledge, informed by the kind of analysis of being that I shall be developing. Specific themes would

concern the manner in which money has come to be identified with value, as the value by which all other values are measured. The value of time too has been inflected by the equivalence asserted by the copula 'is' in the expression 'time is money'. Time, accelerated in cyber-culture, is performatively produced through speed, so that the equivalence of time and speed and money can be assured by virtue of the conversion of time into the simulacral form of money. Within the discourse of neo-liberalism, and new governance, money, infinitely versatile, is becoming the new transcendental object, virtually infinite and total. One would need to examine the diremptions between the time that money buys, as efficient time, and as the coefficient of the rate of appropriation of value, and the time of the who, which is the time of being-in-the-world and of being-with, the time of finitude, the value of which is measured in hope and pleasures.

The critique of the new economy of power will have to address the changes in governance; the globalization of networks of power through the economy and informational and administrative technologies, for instance through NGOs like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization and new media, and through new mechanisms for instituting subjectivities and authorizing ways of being. The critique of knowledge would in part refer to these changes, taking a cue from Lyotard's analysis of the postmodern, but taking centrally into account postcolonial factors and inputs. In part it would be a way of moving away from the traditional epistemological terrain altogether, recognizing that knowing and being are not so neatly separable, and that truth is not a matter of the objective knowledge of some independently existing 'natural' world, since human beings are an intrinsic part of the 'natural' world, and since that world has been 'technically normed' by human societies for a considerable time. We now see with the eyes of all those who have been before us, so that it is a 'complex seeing',[3] which positivist science would like to simplify or rationalize, and that ethnocentric attitudes, both 'black' and 'white', wish to disaggregate and hierarchize.

The task now, after the time of modernity and the time of the gods, the time of universal being and the time of the tribes, is to give to the 'postmodern' its own temporality and its own ethos of being. If I still attach the term 'postmodern' to the time of futurity, it is because the reflections that we are able to pursue, and the discursive and material conditions that we have to recognize, as limit and as condition of possibility, are the result of this extraordinary event called modernity. No one can pretend to stand outside these circumstances or outside the differential and plural history of modernity. So, the question of settling accounts with modernity means the refusal to allow repressive forgetting to place under erasure the debts and the lessons tied up with the consequences of modernity. It does not call for restitution or compensation but for renunciation, in particular the renunciation of the oppressive and exploitative practices, like capitalism, racism, masculinism, ecological imperialism, that cause unacceptable damage to human beings and to the world.

If the project of transforming the present is to be ethically directed and motivated, it must be concerned primarily with the question of what it is good for human beings to be. There has been a widespread assumption that human beings are intrinsically driven towards the ethical – a version of a Rousseauesque noble savage. My view is that the question of becoming ethical is tied to reflection upon a history of responsibility, and that it is thus, as I examine in Chapter 2, part of a universalizing and general project, that is to say, it is a question which modernity itself has put on the agenda in the form of history as a history of responsibility. It remains an indeterminate process, since improvement is neither guaranteed nor automatic; it is a task that must be renewed every generation. My exploration tries to show that subjective and historical transformation is a complex process, working at several levels, involving reflexivity and the work of rememoration, in the sense I develop in Chapter 4, where I correlate it with the refiguration of the history of a community alongside the work of working through. I also argue that working through, in that it accomplishes the refiguration of identity, includes both a form of confronting private fears, pains, anxieties, traumas, memories, guilts, and so on, as in the therapeutic practice, as well as renarrativizations of collective memories and projects. Rememoration is the articulation of the one with the other, which means to say that it is a process that cannot privilege, or be reduced to, rational deliberation. Indeed, one of my central propositions is that the dimension of the aesthetic–expressive, understood as the space where the experience of the sublime and what is un(re)presentably present is brought to presence in the liminality of 'art', is an essential element, functioning at the level both of a critical hermeneutics and of the experiential, combining both mind and body, touching Being 'on its inside part', to borrow an expression from Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987).

Communicative rationality is certainly needed, because of the 'differends' that already exist in contemporary societies and because of the requirements of democratic politics. Deliberative politics, however, are means to an end which from the beginning, well before modernity, have concerned the fulfilment of a life. It will be my aim to establish, first, the unethical nature of any culture and any project of becoming which does not provide conditions which equalize every person's chances for fulfilment; thus, no society so far has been ethical in the sense I am developing in this book. Second, I will show that our presentness has been the indeterminate outcome of mostly irreversible changes that have instituted the lifeworld we inhabit as the ready-to-hand world which we can neither 'cleanse' nor 'forget' because it is the 'flesh' in which we dwell. Today, because of modernity, these conditions apply globally, in the old imperial metropolises as well as in the 'postcolonial' world. So, the 'to come' of postmodernity and the postcoloniality to come have become indissolubly twinned destinies. They announce either the naturalization, through the discourse of efficiency and the promotion of money to the rank of the postmodern transcendent value, of all the violences that currently amplify inequalities and injustices, or the reinvention of

narratives of hope that motivate the transformation of both subjectivities and cultures. In the wake of modernity, we should now envisage the becoming-mature of humanity in terms of the becoming-ethical of post-modern or, more properly, transmodern, societies.

The rest of the book moves in that direction, beginning with a displacement of the question of subjectivity away from the terrain of the philosophy of the subject, by linking it with the standpoint of the historicity of being and of responsibility for the other, and, thus, putting the emphasis on notions of being-with and being-towards-the-other, against the solipsistic privilege of individualism. I will then examine the birth of modernity and its discourse of the subject in terms of the discursive displacements and the historical conditions which combine to establish the conjuncture in which the event of modernity appears. Again, the aim is to draw out conclusions that feed into the main project, particularly to do with the longer genealogy of the fundamental questions that have preoccupied human beings from the beginning of culture, so that modernity itself can be located and localized with respect to these questions. The functioning of the colonial enterprise in the birth of modernity will be a central issue.

There follows an interrogation of the Enlightenment from the point of view of what we may still learn by way of its critique. In particular I will explore further the dimension of the unpresentable and unrepresentable aspects of beingness that 'art' attempts to disclose, a dimension which the analytic of the sublime has sought to express, for instance in Kant's Third Critique and Lyotard's (1994) reflections on that critique. My intention is to extract from this analysis the way we can refigure Foucault's question of who we are in the present in the moment of the 'post' of occidentalism. The focus on Enlightenment discourses is premised on the recognition that it still circumscribes the political, aesthetic, ethical, epistemological, terrain that the point of view of the postmodern problematizes but has not escaped, as is clear in the efforts of figures like Habermas, Rorty, Lyotard or Foucault to redefine the project of human becoming after modernity.

My final chapter deals with the possibility of overcoming these limits. It proposes a negative ethics as regulative Idea, a non-normative, non-prescriptive ethics that transmutes notions of being-with and of responsibility for the other into the principle of respect for the time of the other and recognition of the other. It develops the idea that being-in-the-world implicates an embodied self coupled to concrete others and to the world of objects such that they establish the dwelling in which particular selves are dispersed. Both propositions relate to the historicity of the lifeworld and the temporality of being. One implication concerns the reworking of the notion of project so that it no longer refers to the realization of History, but to the becoming of being as ethical being. Within this problematic, anticipation and emancipation come to be understood as a promise arising from the recognition of injustice and the commonality of suffering – because of finitude, fragility, loss, lack, dependency – and the desire to overcome or transcend these existential conditions. The becoming-ethical of 'humanity'

can thus be seen to be the result of a developmental process suggesting an apprenticeship. The latter combines the concepts of work and of instruction, that is to say, it has both an instrumental and an ethical interest – instrumental in relation to the process of transformation, to *physis*, and ethical by reference to the work one does in coming to recognize that the gift of responsibility and of time fulfils an immemorial promise inscribed in the history of being. The concept of work requires the existence or the elaboration of critical narratives that inform the process by which being questions itself as to its way of being. These narratives operate at the level of the formation of subjectivities, for instance by directing reflection, or disrupting normalizing emplotments and by telling the past differently so that one comes to locate oneself according to a different historicization of the community and of oneself. They include too the expressive domain that makes visible the liminal dimension of beingness, so that the questioning of being brings to presence an elemental passion, driven by hope and memory, seeking to be consumed and liberated in the convivial act of telling. A question that remains is that of knowing whether the gift is motivated by critical reflection or whether it is a desire that wells up in the vulnerability of the face of the other, as the enduring trace of the 'there is'. These considerations clearly invoke ways of thinking about being that transcend modernity, reaching beyond its 'posts', but that modernity rephrased in terms of secular narratives of what it means to be human. The political implications derive from the consequence that all forms of exploitation and oppression everywhere breach the condition for an ethical form of sociality. Besides, the same considerations explicitly bind the destiny of the postmodern with that of the postcolonial, for, in the wake of modernity, the world today consists of complex networks, economic, financial, cultural, technological, political, that relay and condition each other. Everything else is left open to the determination of an indeterminate future.

Notes

1 The affiliation between postcolonial and poststructuralist critiques should not surprise us since both series link up with the critique of modernity by way of the analysis of contemporary culture and subjectivity developed in cultural studies. The latter approach has been crucial to the particular manner in which contemporary philosophy, Marxist theory, semiotics and elements of psychoanalysis were recruited into the analysis of culture. The same mix of theory informs postcolonial theory. Apart from the work of Hall, one should mention Spivak's strategic use of Marxism and deconstruction to maintain a critical distance from the hegemonic discourses of modernity whilst locating her work 'inside/outside' the academic world. Gilroy (1993a) focuses on the counter-cultures of modernity, produced by those marginalized by occidentalism, exemplified in the insurrectional or subversive cultural 'texts' which inscribe their lived experience of modernity marked by displacement and doubleness. He argues that the politics of fulfilment and subjective transformation which underlies these aesthetic products requires attention to rethinking the ethical. The trajectory of postcolonial cultural critique towards questions of foundations and a critical ontology is admirably mirrored in Bhabha's work. The pioneering analyses of Said, for their part, remind us that intellectual work cannot

be separated from the politics of power/knowledge, so that it becomes a duty to speak the truth to power.

2 One needs to bear in mind the different positions, such as green environmentalism, eco-feminism, eco-socialism, deep ecology, and so on, discussed, for example, in Benton (1993) and Macnaghten and Urry (1998).

3 The reference is to the work of Bachelard. See Venn (1982) for a detailed study.

1

REMEMBERING MODERNITY

> Postmodernity is not a new age, it is the rewriting of a number of features claimed as its own by modernity, and first of all its claim to found its legitimacy upon the project of the emancipation of the whole of humanity by means of science and technique. But this rewriting, as I said, has been at work, for a long time already, inside modernity itself.
> (Lyotard, 1988a: 202)

The discourse of modernity in crisis

I will be concerned throughout this book with the question of who comes after the subject of modernity. Immediately every kind of qualification clamours for attention in the wake of this enigmatic intention. To begin with, since every period is fundamentally about the institution of a particular form of subjectivity, the question of who comes after calls up that of the forms of sociality which would inscribe new subjectivities, and thus all the issues which have filled the agenda of postmodernity. It is not my aim to review the relevant debates, for the rewriting that I want to develop is motivated by the possibility of a narration of modernity which is at the same time a critique of the present and the thread for binding the destiny of the postmodern to that of the postcolonial by way of the to-come of subjectivity. Clearly, in saying this, I am taking for granted that the 'post' marks a hiatus in the history of the modern, the index of a crisis as much as of a point of transition towards an indeterminate transmodern future. My remarks are also meant to highlight the relation of critique to the work of memory, for the danger today is that of forgetting the continuities of occidentalist modernity and the risk, therefore, of repeating its violences. The danger is all the more acute now that the restraining hold of liberal humanism no longer deters political action in so many places across the world, and that the ethical values inscribed in the grand narratives that underwrote the project of modernity have become fragile. For all these reasons, the question of who comes, as I shall establish, provokes a fundamental problematization of modern times and of the ethical.

Lyotard, in the text I cited above, argues that rewriting concerns the 'anamnesis of the Thing', and not only of what haunts the birth of 'individuals' as singular beings, but 'of what haunts "language", tradition, the material with which, against which and within which one writes' (1988a: 202). So, every counter-narrative of modernity makes visible in the form of

a memory the trace of what will have been written over in previous narra-
tions, forgotten in the 'oubliette' where whatever is disavowed and silenced
is consigned. Lyotard's thought gestures towards a dimension in critique
that exceeds the claims of objective knowledge, and implicates subjective
investments in the process such that knowing, being and desiring are seen to
relay each other. It follows that while critique belongs to an agonistic space,
it cannot claim an innocent space, immune from what it opposes. So, the
refiguration of the subject, which doubles into a critique of modernity, must
declare its own positioning, acknowledging the provisional character of its
claims, and the fact that the concepts that one may put to work in a
different narration of (post)modernity are 'under erasure', as Hall (1996b)
once put it.

   Another point I want to signal about the historicity of the process of
critique is the fact that it is modernity itself, as event, which provides us with
the conceptual tools and the archive upon which we rely to refigure its
history, and to thus reconstitute our understanding of 'who we are in the
present', to recall Foucault's (1984c) way of rephrasing the question of what
is enlightenment. All events shed light on themselves in this way, that is to
say, they retroactively configure for us the points of reference whereby we
are able to narratively join the past and the present and locate ourselves
along a line of dispersion from them. Every event can thus be thought as a
breach in history which the event itself opens up, thereby making history,
that is, announcing a different future. Clearly, every event has its conditions
of possibility that a genealogy may reconstruct. The points I wish to make
concern the retroactive manner in which the event is designated as inaug-
ural, the degree of indeterminacy which attaches to events and the irrevers-
ible effects they have for history. In rephrasing the question of modernity
and of subjectivity in the form that Foucault gave it, I wish, like him, to
direct attention to the three central issues that modernity had both con-
stituted and problematized. Modernity invented a heroic subject, raging
against the storm of finitude and loss, urged on by narratives of universal
and subjective emancipation to accomplish incomparable deeds, yet reduced
to almost nothing in the machineries of modernization and the abstractions
of systems, now contemplating the ironies of just gaming among the bright
lights of the postmodern world. As for the 'we' which was supposed to
authorize the project of the progressive development of all, standing for the
will of the people, it is now pluralized and dispersed according to the
heterogeneity of goals and political constituencies. Increasingly, the we of
the people survives in a virtual form through the ventriloquism of a medi-
atized political culture. Humanisms, since the Enlightenment, had promised
the realization of a cosmopolitan we, a *sensus communis*, secure in the ability
to determine the future on the basis of consensus and reason. Modernity has
failed to deliver on this and other promises, unable to reconcile the diversity
of cultures, for it could not separate its avowed goal of universal emanci-
pation and liberation from its own history of subjugation. Lastly, the idea
that the present is a point of transition, at the edge of the new, located in

relation to the historicity of events, and thus circumscribed by inevitable limits, belongs to a narrative of history – linear, progressive, driven by a *telos* – that modernity itself inaugurated. The discourse about the meaning of the present is now in crisis, abandoned to the eschatology of endings: of history and of grand projects. In these circumstances, the questioning of who we are in the present should encourage us not only to challenge the narrative of a hegemonic modernity and its foundational discourses, but to endeavour to transcend the limits that seem imposed on us: a paradoxically modern gesture.

This aspect should alert us to be vigilant about the constraining habits of thought which have reduced the stakes in the debates regarding (post)modernity to a question of being for or against particular doctrines and positions, for instance for or against the project of the Enlightenment, or, indeed, for or against modernity itself. One could add to the list of habits a number of familiar dichotomies, particularly those of the individual versus the social, the natural against the human, and all the suppositions and distortions which are collected in the opposition between the modern and the traditional. For instance, the eruption of apparently archaic violences recently – ethnocides in Eastern Europe, in Rwanda, in East Timor, fundamentalist brutalities everywhere – combine with very modernist technologies and interests to remind us of the similar violences that have shadowed the development of modernity from the beginning, certainly in its occidentalist form. Equally, one must refuse the temptation of simplifying the complications associated with the moment of the 'post' by attributing them to the effects of the latest transformations in capitalism or to the plural sites of resistance to the totalizing and globalizing imperatives of a rationalist administrative order. Such an option, however appealing, is too limiting since it already assumes the validity of positions which a break with the conceptual structure of modernity obliges us to suspect.

One of my aims in this book is to deal with this inheritance, interrogating it from the standpoint of a postcoloniality that does not allow itself the comfort of an unblemished marginality. It has been argued that there are other spaces outside modernity, or not inflected by it, upon which the basic questions of human well-being can be, and have been, posed. I initially thought that it might be possible to figure the 'post' of the postmodern from the standpoint of postcoloniality, seeking in that space the distantiation and the discomfort of an 'in-between' position. The problem, once more, is that the terms of this postcolonial interrogation cannot escape the kind of circularity I have just noted, for instance the fact that a concept like 'post' already belongs to a particular, namely, modern, idea of periodization.

So we have to temper the good intentions of radical breaks with the recognition that we neither have the luxury of a blank slate upon which to relocate analysis, nor can we load the dice of critique by claiming the authority of marginal belongings, for instance in the name of women or postcoloniality or Blacks. Nevertheless, without the provocations to rewrite

the history of modernity which feminist and 'postcolonial' challenges to the established narratives of modernity have encouraged, and without the interrogations of the philosophical foundations of the discourses of modernity from within the critical spaces interior to it – today, one could call them deconstructive or poststructuralist – it would not be possible for anyone to think of the possibility of a radical or critical postmodernity. It would clearly not have been possible for me to formulate the problem in the terms that I have been employing, or even to think that there is a problem to worry about at all.

The drift in my line of argument might suggest that the political and theoretical problems we face today are the consequences of modernity. But my intention in this book is far from engaging in yet one more exercise in allocating blame or in wondering what 'went wrong' with the project of modernity. Instead, my task is that of a renarrativization which attempts to establish a new scale for judging the present, for sure informed by the many concerns which have surfaced in the critiques of the present, but focusing on the point of view of the historicity of events in the sense that the past and the future are relayed by way of how the work of memory and history, in narrating the past in a particular way, reorganizes our anticipation of the future. In relation to the 'post' of modernity, I have in mind the possibility of a future which would no longer be fixated by the traumas induced by the events which, in an important sense, began with 1492. Posed in this way, that is to say, by reference to the question of founding narratives and by reference to the point of view of promise and of a possible or desired emancipation, the question of the narration of our epoch entails a discourse of being which prioritizes an idea of justice and of responsibility, and a memorization which activates the relation of debt and of gift to what has been in history.

Already the stakes which appear in the agenda that I am developing signal a desire to break with the privileged terrain – of epistemology and of a logocentric subject, against the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of being – upon which the interrogation of the conditions of (post)modernity has often been reinscribed.

On the uniqueness of modernity

I think it is fruitful to start with the familiar claim that modernity has been a unique period in history characterized by the institution of a radically new form of sociality and of subjectivity. Let us consider three claims that I think characterize this uniqueness and epochality. First, no other period has had as fundamental and widespread an effect as modernity, operating right across the whole world. Nothing has been left untouched in its wake, and there is much that has been irreversibly changed, for good or for ill, directly or indirectly. The interesting point, however, is that the world is irrevocably different not just by reference to the obvious, visible material or spatial

level of transformation, like the technological metropolises that have sprung up in all countries, constructed out of metal and glass and by-products of the petro-chemical industry like plastics, equipped with elec-tronic and electrical systems of communication and forms of energy, disposed in a spatial organization that they make possible and that the modern subject inhabits as its dwelling, a world made up of a multitude of everyday objects which could not have existed before the modern period. It is not possible to account for human capacities and action without that range of technologically constituted and normed objects. Besides, the modern world is different just as much because of the less visible dimension of transformation, to do with what we are able to think and do, the changes in our perception of ourselves arising from the accumulation of knowledges and memories, their sedimentation in the lifeworld, a whole history of conceptual mutations which makes us different. The event called modernity has altered the future, and there is no way back – not even through the most violent forms of 'cleansing'. It is, like other events, a signifier of the relation to time.[1]

Second, modernity is the first historical period to be legitimated on the basis of narratives that are secular in their foundation. I noted earlier that all complex cultures – complex enough to have left traces – have invented narratives in answer to the 'big' questions, to do with the meaning of existence, gathered around the themes that prowl in the shadow of the anguish of finitude and loss and the mysteries of an imponderable destiny. I think that all these questions fundamentally relate to the recognition of the temporality of being (see Osborne, 1995). Before modernity, such narratives appealed to a notion of a transcendent being or entity, imagined in the form of a deity or a divine or supra-human force, independent of human will, yet active in the world in fashioning individual and communal destinies. The discourse of modernity breaks with this metaphysics and onto-theology, that is to say, it breaks with the discourses which refer the problem con-cerning the meaning of being to a basically religious and mythical imagina-tion. Modernity refuses the prioritizing of religious discourse in deciding about truth and value, though it does not quite abandon religious or mythical thought. Modern philosophical discourse operates a distance from the ground of religion through the displacement which relocates historical agency and will in the concept of the logocentric subject, that is, the subject whose constitution is understood in relation to the privilege of *logos* or the cognitive dimension and to the autonomy of the subject. The notion of metanarrative as understood by Lyotard helps us understand the difference. He says that the metanarratives of modernity promise the 'progressive emancipation of reason and of liberty, progressive or catastrophic emanci-pation of labour, enrichment of the whole of humanity through the progress of capitalist technoscience' (1988b: 31). They are not necessarily opposed to the Christian narrative of the redemption of souls through sacrificial love. They share with myths the function of legitimation, but unlike myths, 'they do not look for this legitimacy in an originary founding