

Postcolonial theory and the problematics of history, modernity and the modern.

For my assignment, I will focus on the different concepts of 'modernity' and 'the modern' as how they are being used, described and problematized within the texts of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ron Eyerman. I think it's interesting to look at how these concepts of modernity and the modern are being described as tools of knowledge and power, developed and used by Europe/the West and the possible differences in the way that both scholars try to reconcile with the past/history.

In the text *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty talks about 'the modern' and describing it as 'a *known history*, something which has *already happened elsewhere*, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content' (39). He goes on about the discourse of history as being produced and institutionalized at the university. Through this notion of a 'known history' Chakrabarty argues that there is a development of a certain modernizing narrative(s) that is focused around concepts like 'citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation-state' (41). Chakrabarty argues that through this project of 'the modern' the practice of history is being used as a 'knowledge system' that is firmly embedded in institutional practices that are focused around the already named concepts. He points at Europe and 'the West' as the 'habitus of the modern'. This whole project of the modern can be seen as a discourse through which Europe and the West is trying to impose their power/knowledge on the so called Third-World countries. Chakrabarty is showing us how this idea of the modern is a Western and/or European concept which imposes itself as self-evident. For Chakrabarty it is important for this Other (the Third World inhabitant) to become aware of the fact that (1) this European adjective 'modern' is 'an integral part of the story of European imperialism within global history' and (2) that the 'equating of a certain version of Europe with "modernity" is not the work of Europeans alone; third-world nationalism, as modernizing ideologies par excellence, have been equal partners in the process' (43).

It is interesting to contrast this named concept of 'the modern' with the concept of modernity as given in the text *The Past in Present: Culture and Transmission of Memory* by Ron Eyerman. Eyerman approaches the concept of modernity from the perspective of the sociologist and in his case in relation of the making of African-American identity. To begin with, Eyerman states that sociologists normally seldom

speaking about memory. He states that modernity is characterized by the 'tradition of the new' and 'by future, rather than past, orientation'. Another important view that he gives is that of the classical sociological narrative that focusses not only on the idea of progress but also that of 'freeing individual and society from the shackles of the past' (161). Eyerman tries to step away from this classical view because he thinks that for the forming of an African-American identity it is necessary to embrace their history, a history that is characterized by collective and cultural trauma. Eyerman wants to develop an approach in a more Durkheimian tradition that is known to see collective memory as central to the reproduction of society. The whole idea of the African-American as a group of people is established through recollecting the past. For Eyerman the past is important for the making of African-American identity because 'the past is a collectively shaped, if not collectively experienced, temporal reference point, which is formative of a collective and which serves to orient those individuals within it. The past becomes present through symbolic interactions through narrative and discourse, with memory itself being a product of both, "called upon to legitimate identity, to construct and reconstruct it" (162). The narrative that the African-Americans can develop from their past can provide them with a 'counter-story' in which some 'central concepts of a dominating discourse can be appropriated and given new meaning'.

It is interesting to see how both Chakrabarty and Eyerman unveil modernity as a formative discourse which in general profits Europe/West and undermines the position of the Other. Both, in their own fields of research, distance themselves from these different notions of modernity and the modern and try to develop a narrative for the marginalized Other through which they can develop their own agency and identity. But it seems that they have a different way of using the past. For Eyerman and his sociological perspective modernity is about forgetting the past and he wants to step away from this because for him developing a collective past, and through that a personal narrative, is important for African-Americans to form their own identity. Chakrabarty (as speaking from Indian perspective, being colonized by the British) is suspicious about history and maybe specifically history as a discipline that is taught at schools and universities. For him history is being used as a knowledge system by the West through reproducing certain self-evident concepts which become symbolic for their project of 'the modern'. He is moving away from this so to look for a way for the 'subaltern' to develop their own concepts, identity, agency which is cut loose from the

power and knowledge from the former colonizer the British and Europe and the West of which the British are a part.

I think it could be productive to delve into these different views on how develop alternatives for the marginalized Other to from their own identity and agency. First of all, do you agree with my reading? And do you think I'm right in contrasting these two texts through their approach of modernity and the modern and how they are partly similar and partly different? For example, the notion of the past as used by Eyerman, is this the same as the notion of history as used by Chakrabarty or are they in a way talking about different things? Different ways of looking and understanding? And do you agree with their reading? Maybe it is also interesting to look at the ways they use the concept of the narrative. Because of a lack of space, and to be honest because with the difficulty of clearly understanding, I didn't implement Bhabha's notion of 'the discourse of modernity' and the 'problem of the ambivalent temporality of modernity' but it could make for an interesting discussion to add his article and see how he describes this and maybe how this relates to these texts.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 27-46.

Eyerman, Ron. 'The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory', *Acta Sociologica* 47 (2004), 159-169.