Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development

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JAMES FERGUSON

Africa always seems to come to the question of modernity from without. Generations of Western scholars have considered Africa as either beyond the pale of the modern (the savage heart of darkness that lurks beyond the edges of the civilized world) or before it (the "primitive," "traditional" place always not yet in the time of the up-to-date present). Today, scholars critical of the evolutionist time lines and static essentialisms of older modernization paradigms struggle to redescribe Africa as within the modern. Seeking to deprovincialize the notion of the modern, and to sever its automatic connection with the West, they prefer to locate contemporary African social realities within a broader, pluralized notion of the modern, as constituting an "alternative" modernity.<sup>1</sup>

What are the implications of the different sorts of answers given to the question of Africa's relation to modernity? Is the idea of alternative or multiple modernities a useful one? What is at stake in the assertion that African societies are "less modern" than North American and European ones, and what is accomplished by the contrary claim that they are instead only differently modern, alternatively modern?

I raise this issue not in an attempt to prescribe ways of thinking about modernity, but rather to foreground an important dimension of the discussion that I think has not yet received enough attention. In the course of foregrounding this dimension, I will deliberately ignore or move into the background other significant dimensions of the debates about modernity. If the picture sketched here seems exaggerated and one-dimensional, it is by design. It should also be noted that I treat modernity here not as an analytic term to be defined and applied, but as what anthropologists call a "folk cate-

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