Chapter 1

Introduction

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1   One can see how a conception of the state-society relation, born within the parochial

2   history of Western Europe but made universal by the global sway of capital, dogs the

3   contemporary history of the world.

4   Chatterjee 1993:238   ref155

5   The project of provincializing "Europe" therefore cannot be a project of "cultural

6   relativism." It cannot originate from the stance that the reason/science/universals which

7   help define Europe as the modern are simply "culture-specific" and therefore only

8   belong to the European cultures. For the point is not that Enlightenment rationalism is

9   always unreasonable in itself but rather a matter of documenting how—through what

10 historical process—its "reason," which was not always self-evident to everyone, has

11 been made to look "obvious" far beyond the ground where it originated.

12   Chakrabarty 1992:23   ref151

13   In the Summer of 1643, fearing for his son's safety in the face of the

14 Civil War violence then swirling around Oxford, John Aubrey's father

15 summoned him home from his beloved university to the family estate at

16 Broadchalke, in the south of Wiltshire. Young John languished in rustic

1   isolation for three long years; he describes his sojourn in the country as "a

2   most sad life to me . . . not to have the benefitt of an ingeniose

3   Conversation." For Aubrey, whose company was widely valued in his later

4   life for his skill and grace as a conversationalist, it was a special hardship

5   to have "none but Servants and rustiques"—he terms the local inhabitants

6   "Indigenae, or Aborigines"—with whom to converse (Aubrey

7   1847[1969]:11). "Odi prophanum vulgus et arceo" (I hate and shun the   ref018
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8   common herd), he writes, lamenting his lack of refined interlocutors.

9   Finally, in the Spring of 1646 and "with much adoe," he received his

10   father's leave to depart for London to read law at the Middle Temple, and

11   at last, in November, he was able to return to Oxford and, to his "great joy,"

12   to the "learned conversation" of the fellows (Aubrey 2000:11–12). For the   ref021

13   remainder of his adult life, Aubrey pursued the pleasures of sociability

14   with the most distinguished minds of his day. He was one of the original

15   members of the Royal Society, to which he was elected in 1662, and his

16   learned friends and interlocutors included such luminaries as Thomas

17   Hobbes, Robert Boyle, William Petty, John Locke, and Robert Hooke, with

18   whom he enjoyed an especially close relationship. Aubrey was an early

19   devotee of the Oxford and London coffeehouses and the opportunities for

20   male sociability they provided, extolling "the extreme advantage of

1 coffee-houses in the great Citie, before which men knew not how to be

2 acquainted other than with their own Relations or Societies" (quoted in

3 Tylden-Wright 1991:202).   ref622

4   In Aubrey's learned conversations with his fellow Royal Society

5 members and coffeehouse companions, we may identify in concrete,

6 experiential terms what has been conceived in more abstract and general

7 terms as the discursive construction of modernity. The Royal Society was

8 Britain's preeminent scientific society, an institutional nexus for the

9 cultivation and dissemination of a scientific ideology based on the rational,

10 empirical pursuit of knowledge and the conviction that reason and science

11 will yield universal laws and secure the progress of humankind, now freed

12 from the shackles of traditional authority, blind faith, and superstition. And

13 the coffeehouse looms large—notwithstanding the challenge of other

14 contenders—in foundation narratives of the bourgeois public sphere and

15 related social and political formations widely accepted as diagnostic of

16 modernity. In drawing the contrast, then, between the vulgar conversation

17 of "rustiques" and the "ingeniose conversation" of learned men, Aubrey is

18 contributing to the construction of a particularly modernist opposition

19 between the provincial (he uses the term; see, e.g., Aubrey 1898, 2:326)   ref016

20 and the universal, in discourse-centered terms.

1   There is in addition a temporal, as well as a social and a spatial,

2   dimension to this opposition. Aubrey came to see the temporal juncture

3   that marked the contrastive periods of provincial and learned discourse in

4   his own life, that is, the Civil Wars, as marking also a more epochal

5   watershed between the "old ignorant times" and the "modern" present that

6   is at the center of his antiquarian vision. We discuss this vision more fully

7   later in the book, but it is worth noting here the periodizing leitmotif that

8   runs through Aubrey's writings, locating the full currency of the customs

9   and beliefs to which he devoted his antiquarian researches not only among

10   "Countrey-people" but in the period "when I was a Boy, before the Civill

11   warres" (Aubrey 1972:202, 241). Thus, what emerges in Aubrey's   ref138

12   autobiographical and antiquarian constructions is not only a personal, but a

13   more general pair of associational complexes that resonate strongly through

14   the social thought of the past 300 years: rural (or aboriginal), lower class,

15   ignorant, old-fashioned, indigenous—in a word, provincial—versus urban,

16   elite, learned, cosmopolitan, that is to say, modern.

17   It is just these associational complexes that represent the critical focus

18   of recent works by Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee from which

19   we have drawn our epigraphs. As Chakrabarty and Chatterjee suggest,

20   Western domination did not rely solely on military might and the

1   imposition of particular forms of capitalism but on the promulgation of

2   certain crucial epistemological and ideological orientations as well. In an

3   argument recently extended by Chakrabarty (2000), they suggest that both   ref152

4   colonialism and contemporary inequalities between "First" and "Third

5   Worlds" resulted from a process of "deprovincializing Europe." As part of

6   the process of constructing modernity, European elites produced ideologies

7   and practices and then elevated them to the status of universals that could

8   be used in comprehending and dominating the rest of the world. These

9   schemas "liberally" provided all peoples everywhere the right to cultivate

10   their inherent capacities for rationality, individual autonomy, and the

11   ability to dominate nature in producing wealth. European elites thus

12   provided both the model for assessments as to how a given individual or

13   population measured up to these ideals and accorded themselves the right

14   to occupy the role of assessors for the entire world.

15   Chakrabarty and Chatterjee thus provide us with a useful point of

16   departure for tracking how particular practices came to be seen, in spite of

17   their heterogeneity and contradictions, as a single modernity that could be

18   applied to the entire world in a temporally and spatially defined teleology.

19   At the same time, however, they do not enable us to comprehend the

20   particular logic was used in making the cosmopolitan leap from

1   historically and socially specific provincialities to a supposedly universal

2   schema. Scholars have long argued that the emergence of modern science

3   in seventeenth-century Europe played a key role in this process. Historical

4   narratives have widely suggested that modern science transformed

5   European society by increasing acceptance of a secular, naturalistic

6   worldview that posited a universe governed by natural laws. Practitioners

7   in science studies have recently presented much more complex and

8   interesting ways of telling the story. Shapin and Schaffer (1985) suggest   ref569

9   that the "mechanical philosophy" of seventeenth-century England was

10   hardly as bounded, autonomous, and transparent as received interpretations

11   would suggest. Rather, it revolved around complex and expensive

12   technologies, as quintessentially exemplified by Boyle's airpump, needed

13   for experimentation. The monumental jump in scale from a host of

14   questions as to whether the air was really removed when the pump was in

15   operation, whether the machine leaked, and who could witness its

16   operation to decontextualized, abstract principles that defined basic

17   properties of all nature were mediated by a host of discursive, social, and

18   political-economic "provincialities," to invoke Chakrabarty and

19   Chatterjee's notion. In order for the discourse of leading scientists to

20   become a model for transparency and order for speech and civil society

1   (see Shapin 1994), it took a lot of social work to construct a scientific   ref567

2   realm and project it as authoritative and disinterested.

3   Bruno Latour (1993[1991]) draws on work in science studies in   ref404
                                                                                        ref404

4   presenting an interpretation of the underpinnings, power, and

5   contradictions of modernity. He argues that it was not scientific thinking

6   per se that fueled modernity but rather the construction of cultural domains

7   of "society" and "science" as separate and autonomous. On the one hand,

8   science was deemed to be not a social product but to be derived from a

9   sphere of nature that existed apart from humans; Enlightenment thinkers

10 viewed society, on the other hand, as constructed by humans, as well

11 exemplified by Thomas Hobbes' (1968[1651) political theory. The   ref327
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12 ideological, social, and political wellspring of modernity, according to

13 Latour, involved two contradictory way of relating these two entities. The

14 two realms were constantly linked through processes of mediation and the

15 production of hybrids, forms that linked social characteristics to scientific

16 or technological elements. While the airpump provides a salient

17 seventeenth-century example, nuclear warheads, cellular telephones, and

18 amniocentesis exemplify the way that scientific and technological

19 "advances" in the twentieth century become imbued with powerful social

20 meanings. While this hybridization process invests both social and

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1   scientific forms with political-economic and social power, the work of

2   "purification" seeks to erase awareness of these connections in order to

3   maintain the illusion of the autonomy of these realms. At the same time

4   that purification has, in his estimation, been a constitutive preoccupation

5   for societies that claim to be modern, Latour ironically argues, as the title

6   of his book suggests, that We Have Never Been Modern; if communities

7   must rigorously separate society from science and nature to truly be

8   modern, the proliferation of hybrids excludes everyone from fully

9   deserving this designation.

10   In our view, Latour's characterization of modernity has a number

11   things to recommend it. It neatly captures the way that science, society, and

12   modernity are always precarious works in progress, powerful notions that

13   must be constantly (re)constructed, imbued with authority, and naturalized.

14   It is thus necessary to break constantly with the premodern past and devise

15   reformist schemes for modernizing societies and technologies, because

16   hybrids keep modernity from ever achieving the order and rationality that it

17   is supposed to embody. Latour stresses the constructed and artificial

18   character of these entities, their reliance on socially and historically

19   situated and materially interested practices, and he thus challenges his

20   readers to be wary of assumptions regarding definitions, boundaries, and

1   effects of social categories. At the same time, however, Latour argues that

2   we must see science and society as more than "just" social constructions,

3   that we cannot lose sight of the ways that they get materially embodied or

4   their physical and other effects on human bodies. Latour thus helps us

5   imagine ways of seeing epistemologies, social relations, technologies, and

6   material entities as simulatneously constructed, real, consequential, and

7   dependent on situated and interested practices.

8   Latour does not devote a conspicuous amount of attention to rigorous

9   definition of purity, hybridity, or mediation, and to the extent that we

10   employ these notions in the pages that follow, our own scholarly

11   (modernist? purifying?) impulses require us to specify at least a bit more

12   closely what we take them to mean.[1] When applied to epistemological

13   constructions or to cultural forms more generally, of course, hybridity is a

14   metaphor, which carries with it from taxonomic biology the notion that the

15   hybrid "offspring" is a heterogeneous mixture of relevant constituent

16   elements contributed by the homogeneous (pure) "parent" forms. To be

17   sure, classificatory purity is itself an epistemological construction, and

18   every "pure" form can also be conceived as hybrid by some measure or

19   other. But that is just the point: it is not the ontological status of supposedly

20   "pure" forms that interests us here, but rather the epistemological work of

1   purification, and the concomitant vulnerability of pure, bounded

2   constructions to hybridizing relationships. Mediation is a structural

3   relationship, the synthetic bringing together of two elements (terms,

4   categories, etc.) in such a way as to create a symbolic or conventional

5   relationship between them that is irreducible to two independent dyads. A

6   hybrid is thus a mediating form, but we use the term mediation to

7   foreground the role of mediating terms in bringing "pure" elements—the

8   categorical products of purifying practices—into relational conjunction.

9   Terminology aside, however, we do have one larger objection to

10   Latour's formulation: he left out two of the key constructs that make

11   modernity work and make it precarious! We can refer to them in shorthand

12   as language and tradition, even though adopting these modern designations

13   might draw the reader into the sorts of modern categories (and thus

14   oversimplifications and subordinations) that we scrutinize in this book.

A-Head   15   **Making Language in the Seventeenth Century**

16   Let us take John Locke as a point of departure. Locke would seem to fit

17   Latour's narrative perfectly. The second of his <u>Two Treatises of</u>

18   <u>Government</u> (1960[1690]) is credited with constructing the notions of civil   ref425
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19   society, individual rights, and government that has shaped modern societies