Contemporary debates about alternative or multiple modernities can be situated among a number of new ways of understanding the relationship between historical time and global social hierarchies. This relationship has conventionally been understood in terms of a growing antagonism between an abstract world-time of modernization, and differential spaces and times not yet drawn into that world, and hence defined as different. Abstracted from nature and emptied of cultural meaning, world time was elaborated into an encompassing temporal ideology called ‘history’, and in the context of the colonial experience, superimposed on the infinite plurality of local times and places, distributing them into a hierarchy that legitimated capitalist modernity’s geopolitical dominance.

The effects of capitalist modernity are hardly exhausted by its obvious material consequences. What was altered was also people’s imagination – their sense of their place in an unequal world, and the shape of their pasts and presents. Capitalism involves a continuous and accelerating physical transformation of the natural world, a constant revolutionizing of the means of production, and a continual restructuring of society. And because this change is not just random, but is driven by the ceaseless dynamics of the world market, it gives rise to a sense of historical movement as linear and progressive, a sense of increasing distance from the past, and a corresponding secular sensibility of the possibilities of the future. We can see here the roots of the temporal ideologies of progress, modernization, and development that have provided a widely accepted framework for bringing hierarchy and difference into a stable relationship.

Recent years have witnessed a virtual paradigm shift that has begun to displace the predominantly unilinear and Eurocentric understanding of the origins and dynamics of modernity as a historical process. The extension of globalization studies back into the past has uncovered causal patterns of interconnectedness reaching back well beyond the era of capitalist industrialization. Simultaneously, a major revival of World History studies has significantly revised our understanding of the ‘rise of the West’ itself, relocating it in a wider interactive narrative of the birth of the modern world. And Postcolonial theory has sought to recover both the active agency of subaltern subjects at the height of European imperialism, and the ‘alternative’ and ‘multiple modernities’ which have subsequently come to hybridize the nature of the contemporary world.

Common to all these discourses is an implicit or explicit shift at the level of basic social theory: conceptualizations of social change as internally generated within discrete societies, or externally imposed by some onto others, have been giving ground to explorations of the manifold significance of interaction for the constitution and reproduction of all societies. Yet while all these approaches illuminate the play of difference, polarity, and inequality across the political multiplicity of human social
development, arguably none has yet constituted that multiplicity itself as an explicit object of theory. We find *dynamic* theorizations of internal change over historical *time*; and *comparative* theorizations of external difference across cultural *space*, but we do not find a drawing together of these dynamic and comparative moments of analysis in order to theorize a specifically inter-societal dimension of social change.

This situation too, may now be changing. Various approaches have been evolving which by fusing arguments about interaction and development at a basic social theoretical level might provide points of integration and innovation for the globalization/world history/postcolonial literatures mentioned above. One such approach has recently taken up the idea of ‘uneven and combined development’ and has sought to extend its application both to a fundamental critique of Western classical social theory, and into a reconceptualization of world historical processes, from earliest times to the present.

The intention of this workshop is to bring these various approaches together for a critical reconceptualization of modernity, one that offers a way of rearticulating a range of issues that have become locked into a series of unhelpful binaries: internal/external, modern/traditional, West/non-West. The workshop is scheduled for 12-14 May 2009, and we have plans to publish the proceedings.