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DOI: 10.1057/9781137435811.0001
Global Modernity. A Conceptual Sketch

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National University of Singapore
To Karin
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Preface

When in February 2000 I travelled to Singapore for a job talk at the National University’s sociology department, I had no idea how much this trip would change my life and understanding of the world. Eleven months later I gave my first lecture to what was then an exclusively Asian (in fact, predominantly Singaporean) student body and slowly began to familiarize myself with an academic, social, and cultural environment I had previously had no exposure to whatsoever and for which I was in many ways unprepared. One reason for plunging into the ‘adventure’ that some of my European colleagues thought moving to Singapore meant was that upon landing in the city state, I immediately got the sense that I was catching a glimpse of the future. Partly due to my own ignorance, partly owing to the virtual absence of Asian (or for that matter, any non-Western) realities on the standard sociology curriculum in Germany, this perception came as a surprise. Not any more. What I saw stimulated my curiosity and made me want to understand its causes and consequences. So I began to shift my research agenda, to read a lot about the ‘miraculous’ rise of the East Asian region, to concern myself with various approaches trying to make sense of this spectacular development, as well as of social change and modernization more generally, and gradually I also extended the scope of my observations to the entire globe, motivated by the desire to move beyond the confines of methodological nationalism and to contribute to the building of a genuinely global social science.

This book is the first in a series of planned books in which I hope to share with interested readers what
I believe to have learnt in this ongoing intellectual sojourn. My entry into the field of modernity studies occurred via the multiple modernities literature. Given what I witnessed and experienced in Singapore and much of the larger East Asian region on a daily basis, this literature left me flabbergasted – I could hardly believe what I was reading. My response was therefore mainly negative, pointing out what I considered to be weaknesses and using the paradigm as an example of how best not to do it. The engagement of this literature nonetheless proved fruitful as it prompted me to develop my own ideas, to state positively what I think would be a better way of addressing and conceptualizing the contemporary social world. The concept of global modernity lies at the heart of this endeavor. In my own writings, I first used the term in a paper published in 2007 and presenting data that called into question key tenets of the multiple modernities approach. Since then I have gradually tried to systematize more thoroughly what was originally mentioned only in passing. The present book reflects where these efforts have led me thus far. As the subtitle suggests, the scheme I propose is still quite sketchy and provisional, but I think it is now ready for submission to critical scrutiny by a wider scholarly audience. Subsequent volumes will aim to flesh out the scheme empirically, to explore some of the consequences of the breakthrough of global modernity, to highlight important aspects of global modernization processes, and to suggest suitable policy responses to some of the challenges they present.

Over the years, I have incurred many debts which I gratefully acknowledge. My greatest thanks go to my wife, Karin, to whom this book is dedicated. Next in line to mention is Lian Kwen Fee, then head of the sociology department at NUS, who was instrumental in bringing me to Singapore in the first place and thus, however unwittingly, to setting in motion my academic self-transformation. Then there are several colleagues plus one former student who have read, and generously provided me with helpful comments and suggestions on, earlier versions of the manuscript that eventually morphed into this book. For this, I wish to thank A. Aneesh, Zaheer Baber, Tiffany Jordan Chuang May, Ronald L. Cohen, José Maurício Dominguez, Maribeth Erb, Chuanqi He, Boris Holzer, Oliver Kozlarek, Hellmuth Lange, Donald N. Levine, John W. Meyer, Edward Tiryakian, John Tomlinson, Don Weenink, and an anonymous reviewer for Palgrave Macmillan. Very special thanks are owed to Misha Petrovic and Thomas Gutmann for many years of friendship and extremely stimulating intellectual exchange. Thomas
Gutmann also offered me the ‘stage’ at which I first tried out most of the ideas presented here as well as, in his capacity as director of the Centre for Advanced Study in Bioethics at the University of Münster, a generous fellowship from July to September 2013 during which I was able to complete the draft before submitting it to the publisher. Final polishing and editing of the typescript was done at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF), University of Bielefeld, where I held another, equally generous fellowship during the period October 2013 through March 2014 and which also provided a highly beneficial, academically as well as administratively very supportive environment. Needless to say, none of the above should be blamed for any remaining flaws or weaknesses in the account that follows – the responsibility for them is, of course, all mine.