MODERNITY AS EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATION: TOWARDS CULTURAL TURN IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF "MODERN SOCIETY"[1]

Deneyim ve Yorum Olarak Modernlik: "Modern Toplumun" Sosyolojisinde Kültürel Dönemece Doğru

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Özet

Bu makale, modernliğin kurumsal analizinin modernliği anlamak için yetersiz olduğunu tartışmaktadır. Kurumsal analizin yanı sıra bir modernlik teorisi insanların kendi modernlik deneyimlerini nasıl yorumladıklarına da önem atfetmek durumundadır. Kurumsal ve eleştirel yaklaşımlar olmadan tam anlamıyla modernliği anlayamayız ama bugün modernlik hakkındaki daha verimli görünen düşünme diğer iki yaklaşımda bulunmaktadır: yorumlayıcı ve deneysel yaklaşımlar. Yorumlayıcı yaklaşım modernliğin olası çoğul formlarını anlamak için bir temel sunarken, deneysel yaklaşım da herhangi bir verili ortamda özel bir yorumun gerçekleşme nedenini anlamamıza yardımcı olmaktadır. Bu anlayışları birleştirme çabaları içinde araştırmanın ilgi alanı modernliğin kültürleri olarak tanımlanabilecek bir alana kaymaktadır. "Modernliğin çeşitleri" veya "çoklu modernlikler" üzerindeki araştırma modern anlamın yorumlarının çoğulluğunu analiz etmeyi hedeflemektedir. Ancak, bu yaklaşım da modernliğin orijinal coğrafyası olarak Avrupa'yı anladığı için modernliğin çoğul formlarını salt kültürelci bağlamda ifade etme riskini taşımaktadır. Bu nedenle, Avrupa modernin orijini olarak değil de herhangi bir bölge olarak irdelenmek durumundadır. Dolaysıyla, bu makalede Avrupa modernliğinin tarihi sözünü ettiğim ışık altında değerlendirilecek ve her toplumun birtakım temel sorulara kendi deneyimi içinde yanıtlar aradığı ve Avrupa'nın da bu bağlamda anlaşılması gerektiği tartışılacaktır. Bu tartışma "öteki" modernliklerin yükselişi konusuna da değinerek tamamlanacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Avrupa. Deneyim, Modernlik, Öteki Modernlikler, Yorum

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Modernity: Beyond Institutional Analysis

The Current State of Debate

The social sciences of the early post-Second World War decades worked with the assumption that contemporary Western societies, called 'modern societies', had emerged from earlier social configurations by way of a profound rupture. This rupture, although it could stretch over long periods and occur in different societies at different points in time, regularly brought about a new set of *institutions*, most importantly a market-based industrial economy, a democratic polity, based on an idea of national belonging plus rational administration, and autonomous knowledge-producing institutions developing empirical-analytical sciences. Modernity, thus, was located in space, that is: in 'the West', meaning Western Europe and North America, but it tended to get diffused from there and gain global significance. Once such 'modern society' was established, namely, a superior form of social organization was reached that contained all it needed to adapt successfully to changing circumstances. There would, thus, be no further major social transformation. Once it had emerged, modernity stepped out of cultural context and historical time, so to say.

During the 1980s, it was exactly this key conviction of the modern social sciences that was challenged by the idea of 'post-modernity', often understood as the assertion that Western societies had transformed into an entirely new form of social configuration, based on novel forms of social bond. As such, the assertion was most prominently made in Jean-François Lyotard's 'report on knowledge' of 1979, titled *The postmodern condition*, but as a hypothesis of an ongoing major social transformation it has guided much sociological research since. At roughly the same time, the spatial connotation of the term was also challenged. The rise of Japan, and other East Asian economies somewhat later, to compete with Western economies in global markets suggested that non-Western forms of modernity could exist. The Iranian Revolution, in turn, inaugurated the idea that modernity could be successfully challenged in societies that had appeared to have safely embarked on the long process of 'modernization'.

This is the context in which the term 'modernity' came into use in sociology. The ideas that modernity was neither established in its final form once and for all nor immune to radical reinterpretations outside of its space of origins was now more readily accepted. Nevertheless, conceptual change in much of sociology remained rather limited. The term 'modernity' tended to replace the earlier concept of 'modern society', but it often simply continued to refer to the history of Western societies since the industrial and market revolutions, and since the democratic revolutions and the building of 'modern', rational-bureaucratic nation-states. In the work of Anthony Giddens, to cite one major example, modernity kept being addressed from the angle of 'institutional analysis', and these institutions are those that arose in the West over the past two centuries. All that happens today is that they undergo an internal transformation towards what Giddens calls 'institutional reflexivity' (Giddens, 1990; 1994). This is not a major step beyond Weber's assertion 'that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which [...] lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and value' (Weber, 1930 [1920]: 13). The reader may note that I omitted Weber's insert 'as we like to think'; I will come back to this.

With 'modernity', thus, sociology proposes a key concept for understanding socio-historical development, but oddly makes this concept refer to only a single and unique experience. 'Modernity' is one large-scale occurrence the origins of which can be traced in space and time, but which tends to transcend historical time and cover all socio-cultural space. By identifying a concept with a historical social configuration, sociologists conflate theoretical and historical modes of interrogation in a way that is devastating for their whole project. Fortunately, at some point philosophy, anthropology and postcolonial studies tried to come to the rescue of the (other) social sciences. (Rather unfortunate, in turn, was the fact that many of those in peril did not see any danger and did not want to be rescued.)

From the angle of philosophy, with support from the historiography of concepts, the question of concept-formation in the social sciences came under scrutiny. Questioning the facile presupposition that phenomena in the world can always be constructed as empirical 'cases'

that are to be subsumed under 'concepts', attention was redirected to the actual 'work' of the concepts, to that which concepts are employed to perform, in social-scientific inquiry. Concepts are proposed not least with the purpose of relating experiences to each other that are otherwise simply separate and different. Particular emphasis was given to the suppression of time in such conceptual labour, by virtue of postulating the timeless validity of concepts. From the angle of anthropology and postcolonial studies, related issues were raised with specific regard to the, so to say, conceptual relation between 'modern' and 'traditional' societies, between colonizers and colonized. While maintaining the suppression of historical temporality, so the critical argument goes, time was here re-instituted into concepts in the mode of a 'denial of co-evalness' (Johannes Fabian). And even where a greater sensitivity existed, the degree to which a mere application of concepts that were generated in and for a specific context, most often a European one, to other socio-historical situations could be problematic, was often underestimated (Derrida, 1978; Lyotard, 1979; Koselleck, 1979; Fabian, 1983; Asad, 1995).

Until now, however, it is quite open how such critiques of the conventional social and historical sciences relate to the task of analysing entire social configurations over large stretches of time. Much of the critical work operated in the mode of denunciation and thus tended to discard rather than aim to rethink key concepts of the social sciences. Many of those established concepts, however, do address actual problématiques of human social life, even if they may do so in an overspecific or unreflective way. Thus, work at conceptual *criticism* would also always need to be work at conceptual *retrieval*, i.e. an attempt to understand both the limits and the potential of those concepts. What follows should be seen as a contribution towards a rethinking of the concept 'modernity' in the light of such conceptual retrieval. Starting out from some observations about an existing variety of conceptualizations of 'modernity' in the social sciences, I will claim the need for a spatio-temporally contextualized use of the concept, to then see whether on such a basis something that, with some qualification, one can call European modernity exists and what it looks like.

Varieties of Conceptualizing Modernity

As we have seen, the sociology of modernity operates mostly by means of a distinction between historical eras, by some assumption of a rupture, a major social transformation. Such distinction, however, also demands specification as to how these eras differ, i.e., a conceptualization of what is modern. In other words, the term 'modernity' inevitably carries a double connotation; it is always both philosophical and empirical, or both substantive and temporal, or both conceptual and historical (Yack, 1997; Wagner, 2001). The conceptual imagery of a 'modern society' as developed in mainstream sociology, characterized by a market-based economy and a nation-based democratic polity, aims to reconcile the historical view of modernity, as the history of Europe, and later the West, with a conceptual view of modernity, namely a social configuration composed of sets of functionally differentiated institutions. It provides the master–case for what I will present here as the first of a variety of possible ways of conceptualizing modernity, namely *modernity as an era and as a set of institutions*.

At a closer look, this imagery sits in an uneasy relation to any array of dates in European history against which one may want to test it. Were one to insist that a full set of functionally differentiated institutions needs to exist before a society can be called modern, socio-political modernity would be limited to a relatively small part of the globe during only a part of the twentieth century. This tension between conceptuality and historicity was resolved by introducing an evolutionary logic in societal development. Based on the assumption of a societally effective voluntarism of human action, realms of social life were considered to have gradually separated from one another according to social functions. Religion, politics, the economy, the arts all emerged as separate spheres in a series of historical breaks – known as the scientific, industrial, democratic revolutions etc. – that follows a logic of differentiation (Parsons, 1964; Alexander, 1978). A sequence of otherwise contingent ruptures can thus be read as a history of progress, and the era of modernity emerges through an unfolding from very incomplete beginnings. In this view, indeed, modern society came to full fruition only in the US of the post-Second World War era, but 'modernization' processes were moving towards that *telos* for a long time, and have continued to do so in other parts of the world.

In conceptual terms, this perspective on modern social life aimed at combining an emphasis on free human action with the achievement of greater mastery over the natural and social world. The differentiation of functions and their separate institutionalization was seen as both enhancing human freedom and as increasing the range of human action. Thus, it provided a sociologized version of the Enlightenment combination of freedom and reason, or of autonomy and mastery, or of subjectivity and rationality (e.g., Touraine, 1992).

In direct contrast to this affirmative, even self-congratulatory conceptualization of modernity, major critical inquiries into the dynamics of modernity were elaborated successively from the middle of the nineteenth century up until the 1930s. This is what I call the *grand critiques of modernity*, the second major mode of conceptualizing modernity. They were grand critiques by virtue of the fact that they identified basic problems in the practices of modernity, but did not on those grounds abandon the commitment to modernity. They all problematized, although in very different ways, the tension between the unleashing of the modern dynamics of freedom and rational mastery, on the one hand, and its, often unintended, collective outcome in the form of major societal institutions, on the other. As such, they provided critical interpretations of the self-understanding of European modernity.

The first such critique was the critique of political economy as developed mainly by Karl Marx. The second grand critique was the critique of large-scale organization and bureaucracy, as analyzed most prominently by Robert Michels and Max Weber. A variant of a critique of conceptions of rationality is the critique of modern philosophy and science, the third grand critique. Weber, too, was aware of the great loss the 'disenchantment of the world' in rational domination entailed, but radical and explicit critiques of science were put forward by others in very different forms. In idealist *Lebensphilosophie* the elaboration of a non-scientistic approach to science was attempted as well as, differently, in early twentieth-century 'Western' Marxism, i.e. by Max Horkheimer and the early Frankfurt School. Synthetically, then, an argumentative figure emerged as follows: In the historical development of modernity as 'liberal' society, the self-produced emergence of overarching structures,

such as capitalism and the market, organization and bureaucracy, and modern philosophy and science, is identified. These structures work on the individual subjects and their possibilities for self-realization – up to the threat of self-cancellation of modernity. The more generalized modern practices will become, the more they themselves may undermine the realizability of modernity as a historical project.

This alternative view of modernity, in all its variety, did not really challenge the idea that there is one single form of modernity, emerging in Europe and showing the tendency to transcend time and space. It is thus, despite its critical edge, more a mirror–image than a full alternative to the mainstream sociological view of modernity as the era of functional differentiation. While the critiques of modernity suggested that modernity could not fulfil its promise of increasing both autonomy and rationality in human social life, but tended to undermine both of these commitments, a third, and rather more recent conceptualization of modernity addresses these basic modern commitments from a yet different angle.

Following Cornelius Castoriadis, modernity can be considered as a situation in which the reference to autonomy and mastery provides for a double 'imaginary signification' of social life (Castoriadis, 1990; Arnason, 1989; Wagner, 1994). By this term, Castoriadis refers to what more conventionally would be called a generally held belief or an 'interpretative pattern' (Arnason). More precisely, the two components of this signification are the idea of the autonomy of the human being as the knowing and acting subject, on the one hand, and on the other, the idea of the rationality of the world, i.e. its principled intelligibility. This interpretive approach to modernity, we could say, underlines the importance of the parenthesis 'as we like to think' in Weber's definition of Western rationalism.

With this view, thus, the emphasis shifts from institutions to *interpretations*. Equally starting out from the double concept of autonomy and mastery, even though not in precisely these terms, the sociology of modern society had thought to derive a particular institutional structure from this double imaginary signification. Sociology, for instance, tended to conflate the specific historical form of the European nation-state with the general solution to, as it was often called, the problem of social order,

which was expressed in the concept 'society' (Smelser,1997, chapter 3). When assuming, however, that a modern set of institutions can be derived from the imaginary signification of modernity, it is overlooked that the two elements of this signification are ambivalent each one on its own and tension-ridden between them. Therefore, the recent rethinking takes such tensions to open an interpretative space that is consistent with a variety of institutional forms. The relation between autonomy and mastery institutes an interpretative space that is to be specifically filled in each socio-historic situation through struggles over the situation-grounded appropriate meaning. Theoretically, at least, there is always a plurality and diversity of interpretations within this space.[2]

This interpretative approach has, among other features, the merit of having brought the question of autonomy back to the centre of the analysis of modernity, where it had been almost absent during the long period when concerns for functionality, rationalization and, in the critical views, alienation reigned supreme. This leads to the fourth and final conceptualization of modernity that needs to be briefly discussed. A common view of the history of social life in Europe holds that a 'culture of modernity' spread gradually over the past five centuries. This 'is a culture which is individualist [...]: it prizes autonomy; it gives an important place to self-exploration; and its visions of the good life involve personal commitment' (Taylor, 1989: 305). Such an emphasis on individuality and individualization is equally alien to the functionalist praise of modern society as to the totalizing critiques of modernity, but it is even quite distant from the more formalized 'modern' discourses of the individual as in rational choice theory or in liberal political philosophy. In literature and the arts, the *experience of modernity* was in the centre of attention and, as an experience, it concerned in the first place the human being in her or his singularity, not an exchangeable atom of social life (Berman, 1982). Michel Foucault's lecture 'What is Enlightenment?' very succinctly distinguished between those two readings of modernity. Modernity as an attitude and experience demands the exploration of one's self, the task of

[2] See Skirbekk, 1993. One may argue that the historical critiques of the self-understanding of modernity, as discussed above, can also to be regarded as parts of such interpretative struggle over modernity. However, the proponents mostly saw themselves as offering a superior analysis, not one of a possible variety of interpretations.

separating out, 'from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do or think' (Foucault, 1984: 46). This view is counter-posed to the one that sees modernity as an epoch and a set of institutions, which demand obedience to agreed-upon rules.

Modernity in Time and Space

In sum, the social sciences have long theorized 'modernity', as the attempt to grasp the specificity of the present, even though the term 'modernity' has been used only rather recently. The dominant strand in the social sciences has aimed at capturing this specificity by structural-institutional analysis. The modern institutions are here seen as the embodiments of the promise of freedom and reason. Against and beyond this dominant strand, three different conceptualizations of modernity have been proposed. In parallel to the history of the 'modern social sciences', the critiques of modernity have provided an alternative institutional analysis, emphasizing the undermining of the promise of autonomy in and through the workings of the modern institutions. Both of these views have recently been considered too limited in their approach, namely in committing themselves to an overly specific understanding of modernity. The research and theory during the past quarter of a century that explicitly uses the term 'modernity' is by and large characterized by this insight. The interpretative approach to modernity has demonstrated the breadth of possible interpretations of what is commonly understood as the basic self-understanding, or imaginary signification, of modernity. The conception of modernity as an ethos and an experience has underlined the normative and agential features of modernity. In the former sense, it emphasizes the lack of any given foundations and the possibility to push the 'project of modernity' ever further. In the latter sense, it accentuates creativity and openness.

Not being able to go here into a full assessment of the conclusions from this fourfold variety of conceptualizions of modernity, for the purpose of this article only the following needs to be noted: While we cannot entirely do without the former two approaches, the institutional and the critical one, a significant potential to further develop the thinking about modernity lies today with the latter two, the interpretative and the

experiental one. While the interpretive approach provides the ground for an understanding of the variety of possible forms of modernity, the experiential approach helps to understand why a particular interpretation may come about in any given setting.

In attempts to combine these insights without abandoning the objective of analyzing spatio-temporally extended configurations, research interest in what may be called the cultures of modernity has increased (Friese&Wagner, 2000). Such research on the 'varieties of modernity' or 'multiple modernities' aims at analyzing such wider, present and past, plurality of interpretations of the modern signification (Eisenstadt, 1998). Despite all accomplishments, however, this novel perspective risks to merely multiply the forms of modernity by inscribing them into cultural containers that are coherent and bounded and reproduce themselves over time. It is overall too strongly shaped by the idea that modernity has a specific and constant basic structure, formed in Europe, but can express itself culturally in different ways, on the basis of older value configurations (see, for example, Eisenstadt, 1999: 198). To take the modern commitment to autonomy seriously, however, requires a more open conceptualization of the contexts of modernity, namely as spaces of experience and interpretation, or as 'spatio-temporal envelopes'.[3] In the remainder of this article, I want to illustrate how such an approach could look like when applied to the case of Europe.

European modernity reconsidered

Thus, Europe will here not be identified with the origin of modernity, but will be regarded as a region of the world – as one among many, but with specificities, which would need to be analysed in terms of spaces of experience and interpretation.[4] Five aspects of the European

[3] Latour 2000. Such view entails not only that cultures are no longer seen as bounded entities, as populations held together by coherent sets of shared values and beliefs, stable over time, but it also regards culture no longer as a relatively insignificant addendum to structures, functions and institutions, but as a key to understanding modernity, the latter term namely seen as referring to the interpretative and normative ways in which human being engage their lives with others and the world

[4] As a region rather than province, even though otherwise the approach followed here is close to Chakrabarty's (2000).

experience that are significant when aiming to grasp any contemporary specificity of European modernity will be singled out for this purpose. It was possible to arrange them basically chronologically, i.e. roughly and loosely in the order of their emergence and their rise to significance. But these observations are always also of a conceptual nature. Thus, ideally, the following should be an account of modernity that provides a linkage between history and philosophy, without though conflating the two dimensions. It is a historico-philosophical account broadly in the tradition of Jan Patočka's and, more recently, Massimo Cacciari's 'geo-philosophy'.

Europe as a Colonial Power

The reference-point in European history that is the usual starting-point for any sociological narrative of Europe as modernity, namely the post-revolutionary era from the late-eighteenth century to almost the end of the nineteenth century, will only play a minor role in the following account. This view was historicist (in Dipesh Chakrabarty's sense) and portrayed European history as the history of the realization of freedom and reason. It led from Hegel to Weber, but it keeps serving for self–description and self–understanding up to the present day. The doubts that can be found in Weber are then conveniently overlooked, and later re-elaborations, such as Husserl's attempt at reflection in crisis, entirely ignored. This narrative is too well known to be repeated here.

One aspect of nineteenth-century Europe that was a constitutive component of the identification of Europe with modernity was rarely given central place in accounts of this modernity: Europe as colonial power. The history of colonialism sees Europe certainly as its subject and as the master of the world; it thus emphasizes the modernity of Europe. European history as colonial history establishes precisely the relation between Europe and other parts of the world as relations between 'modernity' and 'tradition', of rupture in temporality and the 'denial of co-evalness'. At the same time, it invited the conceptual distinctions between the 'rational' and the 'cultural', and between the universal and the particular.

However, in terms of an account of modernity as interpretation and experience, one important qualification needs to be made: it was not

Europe, but it was the European nation-states that were colonial powers.[5] There is a remark in Edward Said's *Orientalism* about the figure of Mr. Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, which is more significant than the author may have thought: 'One reason Casaubon cannot finish his Key to All Mythologies is [...] that he is unacquainted with German scholarship' (Said 1978: 19). After this unnecessary remark – he did not need to excuse himself – Said embarked on a more complex and hardly sustainable reasoning. On the one hand, he claimed that German scholarship on the East was not in partnership with 'a protracted, sustained *national* interest in the Orient'; thus, it was secondary and not very significant. On the other hand, though, he saw it as sharing with 'Anglo-French and later American Orientalism [..] a kind of intellectual *authority* over the Orient within Western culture.' This statement suggests not only a somewhat off-the-cuff sociology of knowledge; it also compresses intellectual history over quite some space and time into a straight-jacket. It underestimates the variety of 'European' relations to other parts of the world during the nineteenth century and the variety of forms of knowledge that were produced about these other parts, and it suggests too smooth a move, in both respects, to US dominance in the twentieth century, which then just looks like 'more of the same'.

No comment on the contemporary relation between the 'West' and the 'Orient' shall be added here, tempting as it may be, and the nineteenth century will not be discussed further either. At this point, it should just be underlined that the history of the construction of Europe as a region of the world – under its proper name – is a process of, by and large, the last half century only. Possibly, one can say that there was an earlier European history, from at least the Renaissance onwards (some would say from the declining period of the Western Christian Roman Empire) up to the Enlightenment. But during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Europe as a space of common experience hardly existed, if not as one of the experience of power rivalry between the nation-states, and as a space of common interpretation neither, given that the national, and often nationalist, view of the world dominated self-interpretation and collective

[5] For a more detailed and long-term analysis of the changing forms of European political modernity, see Wagner, 2005.

memory. The attempts at creating a space of common interpretation after Nazism and the Second World War were at least in part a response to, and a consequence of, the 'decentering of Europe' in the course of the disastrous first half of the twentieth century. Such decentering was prepared by what has been called a 'break with tradition' in Europe.

The 'Break with Tradition' in Europe

Studies of the 'colonial encounter' (to use Talal Asad's term) often stress the destruction or dissolution of forms of knowledge, of means of interpretation, of situating oneself in the world, as the result of an occurrence. In postcolonial studies, such an encounter is seen as a confrontation with something that comes from the outside. When modernity was thought of in terms of a break with tradition, as it mostly was, that break was seen as an accomplishment, not without frictions certainly, but achieved from within European society and leading to a superior way of engaging with others and the world. There is, thus, in theorizing modernity, at least a dual meaning of the idea of a 'break with tradition', an enabling one if the break comes from within, and a disabling one if the break is imposed, to speak loosely. In this light, I now want to suggest that Europe has undergone, in addition to that break that allegedly set it onto the route of modernity, a second 'break with tradition' that resembles more the breaks that result from a sudden, shock-like encounter with the unknown.

This latter break was in Europe most strongly marked by the experience of the First World War, but in a broader sense its experience stretched from the late nineteenth century to the end of the Second World War. This experience led first of all to the questioning of the concept of the 'rupture' itself as it was constitutive for thinking the advent of modernity. Rather than using such a notion as an explanatory tool to conceptualise the difference between 'modernity' and 'tradition', it will be taken now as opening the space for a variety of ways to conceive of that relation.

Arguably, this mode of thinking was inaugurated with Friedrich Nietzsche's (1990 [1874]) 'untimely meditation' on the 'use and disadvantage of history for life'. By distinguishing a multiplicity of ways of relating to the past, Nietzsche opened up this relation to indeterminacy.

This step was recognised as well as considerably sharpened and accentuated between the two world wars by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin and later Hannah Arendt. In early writings, already during the First World War, both Heidegger and Benjamin radically questioned the accessibility of the past. Heidegger (1978 [1916]: 427) emphasised the 'qualitative otherness of past times', which entailed that the past was never available to the present as such, but only through a relation of present valuation. Drawing on Heidegger, Benjamin developed then the ideas about the course of history that he should last express in the theses 'on the concept of history'. In the essay on the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility he spoke about 'the shattering of tradition' (1978 [1934]: 439). Reading Kafka and reflecting about the politico-philosophical choices during the inter-war period, Hannah Arendt later described the present as a 'gap between the past and the future'.

Those interpretations can be related, even though all-too-briefly here, to the experiences of the first half of the twentieth century, especially since the end of the First World War. Already as it was waging, the War meant to many observers the abandonment of any hope that 'modernity' was on an essentially peaceful and progressive path and, with this, it conveyed the undeniable insight that 'modernity' included the possibility of unprecedented horrors. The inter-war years – with hindsight nothing more than an extended cease-fire – witnessed the increasing confrontation between opposed proposals to organise a modernity that had proven more shaky and crisis-prone than its proponents had expected. Then, the Nazi government reopened the War and led it recklessly against the populations of Europe including a major part of its own and the entire European Jewry. When this war was over at mid-century, Continental Europe was emptied of any possibility to resort to tradition. The accumulated experiences of this whole period provide the historical background to the emergence of the philosophical debate about the shattering of tradition.

In the light of these observations, a step towards a reinterpretation of European societal developments during the second half of the twentieth century can be taken. The predominant view sees the social world gradually take its modern organised form during the second half of the nineteenth century up to the First World War in parallel processes of

industrialisation, urbanisation, rationalisation (through the modern sciences, but also though bureaucracy) and democratisation in the framework of the nation-state. While some of these processes advance faster than others and in some societies more than in others, everything accelerates after the end of the Second World War, and by the 1960s socio-political modernity is in full place in Northwest Europe and North America. Western modernity seemed to have re-embarked on its successful historical trajectory, if we are willing to believe the standard view. In contrast to this view, I propose to see the struggles over modernity during the first half of the twentieth century and, to speak again loosely, the damages it has inflicted as the major reason for the shaping of European societies after the Second World War. Thus, there was no continuation on a path of modernisation, but conclusions drawn collectively, although with their specific results not necessarily mirroring the intentions, from a historical experience.

This view underlines an overlooked feature of post-war European societies, namely the perceived loss of origins that has now moved far from the philosophical or religious-cosmological issue towards the general impossibility of making actual reference to any 'morality of custom' in everyday social life. The break with all established ways of judging the good, the true and the beautiful was imposed twice – first by the political and military mass mobilisations of the early century and then by the destruction through totalitarianism, war and genocide. And this break was imposed in such a way that large segments of society could not escape the reach of that destruction. The massive material need for reconstruction after the war as well as the re-education programmes in the defeated societies, and the silencing of the rift between resisters and collaborators in the liberated societies, assured the presence of that experience until far into the post-war period.[6]

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[6] In *A sociology of Modernity* (Wagner, 1994, chap. 4) I have discussed the tendency of modernity towards self-cancellation as inherent in certain societal implications of the liberal notion of self-regulation; thus, the focus was on self-cancellation of liberal varieties of modernity. Continuing on that train of thought, one might say that the accumulated experiences of the first half of the twentieth century bear witness to a related tendency towards self-cancellation in organised modernity (see for the above reasoning also Wagner, 2001, chap. 4).

The Rise of 'Other Modernities'

These observations lead directly to the third aspect of European modernity: During the same period, the early twentieth century, Europeans did not only witness the crisis of their own self-understanding, but at the same time the rise of the US, an occurrence that made it impossible for them to see themselves any longer as the vanguard of modernity, but rather, at best, as one among several modernities. In their relation to the US as a different socio-political configuration, Europeans saw their own modernity as in many respects inferior, especially with regard to technology, economy, organization, and social life, including importantly gender relations, and politics. In significant respects, however, they also saw themselves as still superior, with regard to morality and philosophy namely, thus giving a strong normative tone to many of the writings about America during the interwar period.

Overall, an image of America as 'the other' of Europe emerged (for more detail on the below see Wagner, 1999). In brief: 'America' in this view is what we may call *presentist*, that is, without history and tradition. As Ferdinand Toennies (1922: 356) wrote in 1922 about public opinion in America: 'Its knowledge of the old world, thus of the foundations of its own culture, is rather deficient; it thus lives much more in the present and in representations of the future which are exclusively determined by the present'. America is also *individualist*, that is, there are no ties between the human beings except for those that they themselves create. And it is *rationalist*, that is, it knows no common norms and values except the increase of instrumental mastery, the striving to efficiently use whatever is at hand to reach one's purposes. Again Toennies (1922: 357), here using Weber's concept of rationality, expresses succinctly his view on American public opinion as 'the essential expression of the spirit of a nation': it is '"rationalistic" [...] in the sense of a reason which prefers to be occupied with the means for external purposes'. And, finally, America is what we may call *immanentist*, that is, it rejects the notion of any common higher purpose, anything that transcends the individual lives and may give them orientation and direction.

Rather than an enumeration of distinct features, this is a cascade of characteristics where each single one refers to all the other ones.

Individualism is directly related to the absence of history, which namely could have been a source of commonalities; and instrumental rationalism may be seen to follow from the absence of any common higher orientation. Trying to condense the imagery even further, we can say that the 'America' the Europeans perceived was the uncontaminated realisation of the modernist principles of *autonomy* and *rationality*. America was *pure modernity*. The significance of this view does not lie in the degree of correspondence to any American reality, and no such claim is intended here, but in the possibility of thinking about modernity in terms of a variety of different socio-political instantiations.

The European experience of a different American modernity, thus, opens the space for an understanding of 'varieties of modernity'. But any such conceptualization advanced but little at this time, because this thinking takes place under the threat of losing all that is important. A highly asymmetrical relation between these two modernities is assumed; and European modernity is no longer the spearhead of progressive history, but becomes a 'tradition of modernity' (Derrida, 1989). If we consider the earlier observation of a 'break with tradition' in European modernity together with the one about the rise of 'other modernities', we see how Europe moves closer to the colonized world. A 'decentering of Europe' takes place in the self-awareness of Europeans. It opens a way for, within certain limits, pursuing European studies as subaltern studies.

The Rise of a Self-Critical Attitude to Collective Memory

The final two observations about European specificities refer to the post-Second World War period, and these orientations are in many respects consequences from the insights into the former experiences, i.e. a re-interpretation of the experiences from the first half of the twentieth century. The first of these concern the 'internal' self-understanding of modernity in Europe, the second one its relation to the world, its position in it.

European history between 1800 and 1950, as briefly discussed above, and maybe even too much accepted in the historical and social sciences, is predominantly a history of nation-states. Collective memory during this period gains ever more the form of national memory – across a

historical trajectory that reaches from cultural-linguistic theories of the polity in romanticism to national-liberal movements to the so-called national unifications, e.g. of Italy and Germany, to the increasingly aggressive nationalism of the early twentieth century. In this light, the current process of European integration is a quite exceptional occurrence. If conflicts between West European nations are today utterly inconceivable, this is so because of an effective overcoming of the idea of an absolute tie to the national form in the wake of the preceding historical experience.

In terms of political theory, Jean-Marc Ferry (2000) has recently claimed that a 'self-critical attitude towards national historical memory' has become part of the 'ethical substance' of the European polity. There is likely to be too much of an evolutionary understanding in this view, leading straight from Hegel's 'ethical substance' to Habermas' hope for 'expanding normative-political horizons', but nevertheless Ferry captures an important aspect of recent European developments. There is one main addition that needs to be made to this observation; and this addition changes the picture entirely. It needs emphasizing, namely, that this evolution, if it is one, has occurred not in any process of societal rationalization, as modernists including Habermas would prefer, but through the experience of failure, and through the insight into such failure. It takes place against the background of the experience of a break with tradition and of the rise of other modernities. As far as I can see, and obviously without ruling out the possibility of similar developments elsewhere in the world, this pronounced self-critical attitude to collective memory is indeed a specificity of contemporary European modernity. It supports the repositioning of the nations within European history, in terms of what one may call an internal decentering of Europe. This leads me to the final aspect of European modernity that I want to discuss.

European Responsibility in the Current Global Context

The question is whether there is a similar, or at least related, repositioning of Europe within the world, or in other words, whether the combined effect of de–colonization and the rise of a postcolonial

intellectual perspective has made a difference for the self–understanding of European modernity. A recent analysis of the transformations of the European development policy discourse towards the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries reveals significant shifts in the self-understanding of European development policy over the past three decades (for details on the below see Karagiannis, 2004). In particular, shifts in the use of the term 'responsibility' signal changes in the European attitude to the presence of the colonial past. Responsibility, which was once understood hierarchically, as a responsibility of the Europeans for their colonial past and its consequences, is increasingly understood in an egalitarian way, as a mutual responsibility of European and ACP countries for sustainable development. Parallel shifts in the use of 'efficiency', both in terms of a generally increased importance and in terms of a re-interpretation, appear to reflect experiences in the post-colonial interaction. Efficiency, which was once understood in an 'industrial' sense, that is as using scarce means rationally towards a pre-conceived purpose, namely development, is increasingly used rather in a 'market' sense, that is, in terms of removing obstacles to free exchange, which as such will guarantee a rational outcome.[7]

The analysis in question remains far from any mere denunciation of those shifts – e.g., in terms of an attempt at liberation from historical guilt or of full subordination to a 'pensée unique' of market efficiency – but insists instead on the plurality of possibilities of justification and their ambivalence in any complex constellation such as the one between the EU and the ACP countries. Conversely, such analysis is obviously also far from suggesting that European development policy stands on normatively sound foundations or that it is in any way to be considered adequate to the situation. But it does underline that there has been an ongoing debate about the meaning of European modernity in relation to Europe's former colonies, a debate with a certain degree of sophistication and, more importantly, one that explicitly employs repertoires of moral-political evaluation with a variety of possible outcomes and, indeed, undergoes change over time.

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[7] The use of the terms 'industry' and 'market' in this sense is borrowed from Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991.

Beyond the Modernist Regression

The above attempt at providing a short narrative on a spatio-temporally specific experience and interpretation of European modernity cannot be 'concluded' in a standard way. Suffice it to re-state that recent work on the conceptualization of modernity has demonstrated that modernity is not fruitfully understood as either the superior – more rational – solution to the problem of organizing social life or as an ideology in need of critique or deconstruction. Rather, it should be conceptualized as an interpretive relation to the world that lays bare, or maybe better: brings about, a range of problématiques to which a variety of responses are possible. These responses are then always determined in a situation, defined by its space and its time, that is interpreted as problematic and in which various cultural resources are available for the solution of that which is problematic. Such a view of modernity, even though certainly not uncontested, is philosophically more or less established. However, it still needs to face its 'épreuve de réalité', to use an expression employed by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in their political and moral sociology. It yet needs to be shown that it can be translated into a comparative-historical sociology and anthropology, with politico-philosophical sensitivity, of Western and non–Western societies. The preceding reflections were meant to be a small theoretical and historical contribution towards such contextualization of modernity as always specific in space and in time.

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