Modernity at the beginning of the 21st Century
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Edited by

Volker H. Schmidt

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CHAPTER ONE

INTO THE SECOND MILLENNIUM: MODERNITY
AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

VOLKER H. SCHMIDT

Modernity is back on sociology’s agenda. From the beginnings of sociology as an academic discipline, questions surrounding the meaning and consequences of modernity have fascinated generations of sociologists. The initial interest in the concept was inspired by a sense of a deep rupture (and crisis) afflicting European society, a sense that society had irrevocably departed ‘from a path it had followed for millennia’ (Nisbet 1965: 20) and was approaching something fundamentally different from the past, an entirely new form of societal organisation that bore little resemblance to anything known before. Where exactly this transformation was headed was by no means clear, but around the 18th century a growing number of European intellectuals and scholars realised that the changes that had been in the making since the late 15th century were irreversible and could not be contained in any particular region or confined to particular sectors of society, but would ultimately transform all spheres of life. Like other thinkers, sociologists observed this transformation with awe, and their attitude towards it was from the outset ambivalent. On the one hand, the growing liberties that accompanied the decline of the estate order of Mediaeval feudalism were welcomed as harbingers of an age of freedom in which human creativity could flourish like never before; on the other, an increasingly idealised past served as the reference point for diagnoses of a loss of community and virtue, a decay of civilisation, etc., informed by a deep conservatism that has remained a constant in sociological thought to the present day.

Perhaps the first eminent sociological theorist who unambiguously embraced modernity was Talcott Parsons, and this, arguably more than anything else, explains his marginal position in contemporary sociology.
Sociologists are always in search of a crisis, and Parsons’ work has little to offer for a ‘Krisenwissenschaft’, a science of crises, as sociology has long understood itself. An optimistic or ‘affirmative’ stance towards the modern world, as fashioned by much of mainstream economics, is unacceptable to many sociologists.

The implications of the ‘sense of crisis’ that many sociologists share (often quite independently of their political leanings) are far-reaching and they tend to influence the choice of conceptual tools as well. ‘Capitalism’, which was the master concept of sociology throughout much of the 20th century, serves the sentiments of a ‘critical sociology’ better than ‘modernity’ because, while it is easy to reject the excessive inequalities that a socially ‘dis-embedded’ (Polanyi 1957) capitalism produces, a whole-hearted dismissal of modernity is more difficult, given that modernity, despite its many downsides, is also associated with a number of developments that many sociologists embrace – not the least of which is a growing emphasis on social equality, which is of course in tension with capitalism.

One of the effects of the collapse of socialism in the Soviet empire was that it silenced the critique of capitalism for a while, because it left the critics with no alternative model of societal (or rather, economic) organisation. This and several other developments, ironically including the ‘postmodern’ intellectual movement from the late 1970s onwards, created space for renewed interest in ‘modernity’. ‘Postmodernism’ may have been instrumental for this renewal because it brought, albeit through negation, the language of modernity back onto the social scientific agenda. The movement itself now seems to have exhausted its energies. One still finds references to it here and there, but by and large the excitement it aroused among intellectuals is over. Instead, there is now a growing sense that many of the phenomena referred to as signals of a new epoch in the making, whilst real and in some ways fundamentally altering the everyday realities and living conditions facing (primarily) the populations of (Western) Europe and North America, are not the hallmarks of an altogether new type of societal formation, but just the latest manifestations of a social order to which continuously accelerating change is endemic. Thus, the rise of the tertiary sector and the concomitant (relative) decline of manufacturing, of mass production organised in a ‘Fordist’ production regime, in the most advanced economies of the world in no way alter the logic of capitalism; they only shift the focus of economic attention and activity. Nor has mass production itself come to an end, it only moved to new locations where the (relatively low-skilled) labour it utilises is cheaper, thus expanding the
geographic scope and reach of capitalism by integrating newly industrialising countries.

Likewise, growing individualisation, value pluralism and organisational fragmentation do not point beyond modernity. Instead, they are better understood as manifestations of the spread of (increasingly higher levels of) education and wealth to large fractions of the population whose result is a multiplication of options, lifestyles and dispositions that had previously been the privilege of the avant-garde elite. When the majority of the people are barely literate and poor, there tends to be greater homogeneity in living levels, modes of thought, biographical patterns and lifestyles than when 30 per cent or more (in some countries nowadays up to 50) percent of the people undergo tertiary education. Such education not only enhances workers’ income chances, but also gives rise to a more reflexive attitude towards established societal norms (and hence increases the likelihood of reaching a ‘post-conventional’ stage of ethical reasoning) as well as to a different attitude towards one’s own lives, which only then can become a ‘project’, something to be planned and executed by the individual him- or herself. When the epistemological and geographical horizons of millions of people expand within a matter of a few decades, then the ‘menu’ of values to pick from is obviously larger than at a time when only tiny minorities had access to the world’s knowledge and cultural heritage. In hindsight, it is therefore not surprising that the phenomena associated with what some now call the ‘organised’ stage of modernity should have given way to more individualistic (and more consumption-driven) life styles, a greater emphasis on choice, self-expression, etc.

In the past half-century, modernity has not only penetrated its Western birthplace much more deeply; it has also spread to other world regions at a historically unprecedented pace. As a result, modernity is now a genuinely global phenomenon. Moreover, with East Asia, there is now an entire non-Western region that has reached levels of development comparable to the West. If China’s rise continues unabated, then this region will soon be the largest fully modernised part of the world. It may thus become a serious competitor in the creation of ‘world culture’ and, more specifically, of ‘world [developmental] models’, whose designation has thus far by and large been the prerogative of the West. This, in turn could set the stage for an entirely new phase of modernity in which what it means to be modern might differ substantially from its present understanding, which is still dominated by specifically Western experiences and values.

But what is modernity, anyway? One of the problems facing any effort to come to terms with modernity is its conceptual meaning. The present
volume focuses on the way the concept is (or ought to be) understood sociologically. Like much of the classical sociological tradition, Yves Bonny proposes to reserve the notion of modernity for a specific type of society and civilisation, a set of internally coherent structural characteristics, as well as a complementary set of social imaginaries and normative-ideological orientations, whose origins are to be found in Europe, but which has now spread to all parts of the globe. Bonny warns, however, against treating all presently existing societies as equally modern. Moreover, given the global spread of modernity, we should guard against equating modernity with ‘Western civilisation’, which is but one of modernity’s possible manifestations. These considerations lead him to suggest three distinctions: that between the modern and the ‘contemporary’, that between modern and ‘post-traditional’ societies, and that between modernity in general and its peculiarly Western variety, which long served as the key reference point in discussions of the concept. Since modernity changes its outlook over time and takes on a different shape in different contexts and regions, we further need to distinguish phases of modernity in the temporal dimension and varieties of modernity in the spatial dimension. Armed with these analytical tools and distinctions, Bonny detects in what he calls the post-traditional universe – a term he prefers to that of modernity – four common trends of social change, namely tendencies towards (1) generalised denaturalisation, (2) the weakening of traditional communitarian structuring, (3) the weakening of patterns of verticality, and (4) the differentiation of social worlds and social spheres. In contemporary societies, these trends are driven by the gradual disenchantment of the world, by the diffusion of liberal democracy as a model for legitimising political actions and orders, and by various forces that subvert the former, thus giving rise to continuous contradictions whose – always provisional – solutions can differ substantially from society to society.

Hartmut Rosa starts off with a similarly demanding programme for detecting the main features characterising modernity. His conceptualisation seeks to account for both modernity’s (historical as well as cultural) diversity and for its unity. According to Rosa, this is best achieved by focusing on modernity’s processual nature, i.e. on the ongoing modernisation of society, which, rather than simply reflecting the dynamics of developments resulting in peculiarly modern life forms, constitutes modernity’s very core, that which distinguishes modernity from other, non-modern types of societal organisation. And since the modernisation process, once set in motion, has been constantly accelerating, what is required to understand modernity is a theory of social
acceleration. Such a theory is what Rosa aims to develop. The theory of acceleration he proposes is three-dimensional, distinguishing technological acceleration within society from accelerations of society itself and from the acceleration of the pace of life, respectively. Being a process theory of modernity, it will come as no surprise that this theory, like most of its competitors, also distinguishes different phases of modernity, with each phase marked by its own pace of change. Thus, ‘early’ modernity is the phase during which a substantial change in society’s basic structures required several generations. During ‘classical’ or ‘high’ modernity, this pace was reduced to one generation, and in the current phase of ‘late’ modernity, far-reaching change can occur in a matter of just a few decades, i.e. at intra-generational pace.

Mikael Carleheden likewise favours a phased approach, viewing modernity as plural both in the socio-cultural dimension of space and in the temporal dimension, in which distinct forms or rather epochs of modernity succeed one another. Whereas Rosa’s focus is primarily on the social structural aspects of modernity and modernisation, Carleheden places greater emphasis on the cultural and motivational sources inspiring agents of change. Following Peter Wagner, and restricting himself to Western modernity rather than claiming global validity for his propositions, Carleheden suggests three such epochs can be distinguished, namely ‘restricted liberal modernity’, ‘organised modernity’, and ‘extended liberal modernity’, the epoch the West is presently approaching. Enriching Wagner’s approach with the concept of a ‘conduct of life’, borrowed from Carl-Göran Heidegren and referring to people’s efforts of mastering and shaping their lives, Carleheden derives a threefold typology of ‘ages’ that Western modernity has gone through: the age of asceticism, the age of organisation, and the (present) age of authenticity, with each age reflecting a distinct ethic of conduct of life, or ‘Lebensführung’ in Weber’s original formulation. Each stage combines the two conflicting principles driving the modernisation process, namely discipline and freedom, in a unique fashion. During the transition from one stage to the next, (modern) society undergoes a deep crisis in which the specific character of the above combination, the relative weighting of the elements of discipline and freedom, is negotiated, until some longer-lasting equilibrium is reached.

The next three chapters likewise focus on the cultural aspects of modernity and modernisation. Edward Tiryakian takes issue with Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisation’ thesis, which he believes is not only substantively flawed but also politically problematic. According to Tiryakian, in some cases Huntington over-dramatises what upon close
inspection turn out to be relatively minor differences between
civilisations. An example would be the values espoused by
Confucianism and Western modernity, which in Tiryakian’s reading
overlap to a significant extent. Given the movement of increasing
numbers of people across continents, he also charges Huntington
with holding an antiquated view of civilisations being located in
specified geographical areas. One point that Tiryakian finds
agreeable is Huntington’s claim that the world of Islam finds itself in
tension with the rest of the world, if not with modernity itself.
He also praises Huntington’s re-opening, in a later work, of the
debate of Weber’s thesis concerning the impact of culture and
religion on development/modernisation; a debate whose renewal
would seem timely against the backdrop of East Asia’s rise, which
raises the possibility that modernity’s centre might soon move eastwards,
as hypothesised by Tiryakian himself (1985) two decades ago. But Tiryakian
pleads that the West should not respond to its own relative decline with a
confrontational approach. Instead, it should try to engage the East in
genuine dialogue. If we try to build bridges between the East and the
West, he concludes, then there is hope for a programme that could renew
modernity, carrying it into the 21st century and sharing its benefits more
evenly across world regions.

Like Tiryakian, Mike Featherstone reflects upon some of the
consequences of East Asia’s rise. Taking recent debates about the concept
of modernity as his point of departure, Featherstone suggests the
confusion surrounding notions such as that of ‘postmodernity’ that were
fashionable in the 1980s might reflect a growing, yet insufficiently
grasped sense among Western intellectuals that the world was on the edge
of a shift to new times. But rather than moving beyond modernity, the
rapid modernisation of non-Western regions, especially of East Asia,
means a shifting of the balance of global power – economically,
politically, and probably also culturally. In other words, something
significant was indeed happening, but what has only recently begun to
dawn upon us is that this something is not the end of the modern age but
rather, through the spread of modernity, the end of the age of Western
hegemony that shaped world affairs during the past 500 years. Focusing
on the cultural dimension of this process, Featherstone suggests the rise of
Asia could soon begin to affect the flow of academic knowledge as well,
and consequently lead to a redefinition of modernity. Featherstone then
discusses some of the key cultural aspects of Chinese and Japanese
modernity, which exhibit some commonality with those of the West, but
also differ from it (as well as from each other) in important ways. The
concluding parts of his chapter are devoted to conceptual reflections about the implications for theorisations of modernity.

Oliver Kozlarek proposes to understand modernity as a form of awareness that he calls ‘world consciousness’. In his view, past conceptualisations of modernity, especially those of modernisation theory, suffer from an overemphasis of the temporal dimension at the cost of territoriality, which, despite its centrality for an adequate theory of modernity, has been largely ignored in the pertinent literature. Among the greatest flaws to which this negligence has given rise is an overly Euro- or Western-centric view of modernity, which downplays other, alternative ‘logics of modernity’ working themselves out elsewhere in the world and tending to be misrepresented in critiques that consider them through Western lenses. To do justice to non-Western societies is to create conceptual space for acknowledging the diversity of forms that modernity can take and to accept this diversity. Rather than treating some societies as less and others as more modern, modernity ought to be seen as a global reality with regional and local variations. Kozlarek suggests that important building blocks for developing the requisite analytical tools can be found in the works of several European thinkers, particularly in that of Alexander von Humboldt, who originated a science reflecting world consciousness and aiming to produce (unprejudiced) world knowledge. Today, one of the most promising candidates meeting Kozlarek’s expectations is the multiple modernities approach of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and his followers. This approach also lays important foundations for ‘a multi-optical critique of modernity’, the desirability of which Kozlarek briefly sketches in his concluding remarks.

The multiple modernities approach, while touched upon in several contributions to this volume, also figures prominently in the last two chapters, which shed more critical light upon it. Alberto Martinelli believes this approach deserves praise for having heightened our sense of the variability of modern forms, both institutionally and in the symbolic universe of meanings. But that should not lead us to forget the European origins of modernity. The spread of modernity to other world regions is therefore bound to leave a deep imprint on these other regions’ cultural forms, social practices and institutional arrangements. Consequently, global modernity exhibits more elements of convergence than the advocates of the multiple modernities approach are willing to admit. Moreover, they have a tendency to overstate cultural aspects of modernity and to underestimate the significance of structural forces. They also downplay the revolutionary character of the (European) breakthrough to modernity that is strongly emphasised by modernisation theory, which
should therefore not be dismissed too lightheartedly. Drawing upon several like-minded scholars, Martinelli’s own work stresses the inherent contradictions and the conflicts that have afflicted modernity from its early beginnings and that play themselves out differently in different social, spatial and temporal contexts. But while they provide ample scope for variations of site-specific adaptations, the multiplicity of forms permitted by the cultural codes of modernity is not unlimited. Rather than focusing almost exclusively on diversity, we should also not lose sight of the substantial similarities that exist among modern societies.

While Martinelli thinks the multiple modernists raise some valid points, Volker H. Schmidt finds little of merit in their approach. Instead, he defends modernisation theory, which can accommodate much more diversity than its critics are willing to grant. That modernisation theory does not emphasise such diversity very much should not surprise, as it has no bearing on its subject matter, the dynamics and spread of modern society. Modernisation theory is best conceived of as a process theory of modernity, and the purpose of a theory of modernity is to analyse and capture what is unique to modernity as against other societal formations. As such, it is bound to be relatively abstract and to focus on the basic structures of modern society, not on the specific forms in which these manifest themselves on the ground. Schmidt does not dismiss these forms as irrelevant, but argues that their conceptualisation should be relegated to ‘middle range’ theories whose analytical scope is more confined than that of general (‘grand’) theories of society, of which the theory of modernity is perhaps the most prominent example. The theory of modernity preferred by Schmidt himself is the differentiation theory of Niklas Luhmann, which he believes is the most sophisticated theory of the modern age that sociology has thus far produced. Armed with the conceptual toolbox of (a much simplified version of) this theory, Schmidt also defends modernisation theory’s distinction between degrees of modernity and modernisation achieved by different societies and in different world regions; he argues, in fact, that the differences marking the dividing line between modernity and pre- or semi-modernity are far more significant than those highlighted by the multiple modernists. He then discusses various empirical trends that suggest modernity, far from rapidly approaching its endpoint, might in a certain sense still be in its early stages, as genuinely modern social structures and living conditions have only recently begun to touch the majority of the world’s population.

Like any volume dealing with a subject matter as complex and controversial as the present one, its chapters offer no conclusive answers to the questions they raise and address. The debate about modernity, to
which they hope to make a useful contribution, must and will continue –
hopefully with greater sobriety and in an atmosphere that is less politically
charged than the social science culture of the past few decades. And while
the authors disagree on many points, they all agree on one key point:
modernity is not over yet. It has been gradually developing over the
course of the past 500 years, taking on different shapes at different times
and in different places, and it will in all likelihood continue to evolve
during the 21st century, modernity’s second millennium. 500 years is a lot
of time from the viewpoint of an individual human being, far surpassing
any person’s horizon and capacity of imagination, but it is a relatively
short span in the history of humanity. It might well be that we have not
seen very much yet and that modernity is only just beginning to work
itself out globally.

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CHAPTER TWO

INTERPRETING, CODING AND NARRATING OUR HISTORICAL CONDITION: RELEVANCE AND LIMITS OF THE NOTION OF MODERNITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

YVES BONNY

Among the different categories mobilised to interpret social and cultural transformations in a macro-social perspective, the notion of modernity is one of the most frequently used, whether in ordinary discourses or in social-scientific analyses. Our era and our society are continuously described as being ‘modern’: at the peak of ‘modernity’. We also regularly hear talk of the necessary ‘modernisation’ of firms or administrations. These different terms are used in all sorts of contexts, without much precision, and they condense a number of important factors, which are not always very clear, but generally imply a valorisation of change, of novelty. Being modern, in the ordinary meaning of the term, is being in phase with the present, not being oriented towards the past or set rigidly in one’s habits, but on the contrary looking constantly to the future, and accepting endless disruptions which are the sign of progress. This repertoire of signification allows its user to mark at the same time an adhesion and a difference, which is its first vocation. Designating oneself as ‘modern’ is affirming a set of orientations and values, as well as distinguishing oneself from those who are not, and who will be labelled - depending on the case - as ‘archaic’, ‘traditional’, or ‘classical’. In other words, the adjective ‘modern’ and its different derivatives are relational terms, which only assume meaning within a contextual perspective, i.e. in opposition to something else.

The present is however also marked by a significant weakening of the way in which this category was until recently apprehended and theorised,
most notably around an implicit or explicit opposition between tradition and modernity and around a largely linear, if not frankly evolutionist, conception of socio-historical transformations, associated with the history of so-called ‘Western civilisation’. The European historians’ increasing temporal distance from the ‘Modern times’ and distance from the contemporary sociological theorisation of modernity which issued from those times has lead to a plurality of theories. The development of major but often diverging or conflictual dynamics of transformation in almost all societies in the world (with the result that the geographical opposition between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ societies is no longer possible to hold), the increasing interdependencies between societies, the intellectual crisis of the notion of progress and the calling into question of evolutionist interpretive models, the acceleration of history and the compression of space, all these phenomena explain the emergence of new theoretical perspectives and new appellations, such as late or advanced modernity, hypermodernity, global modernity, multiple modernities, and of course postmodernity. What all these terms have in common is the idea that contemporary cultural-ideological orientations and forms of social organisation are characterised by significant transformations with regard to what is now frequently designated by contrast – at least by those who reason in terms of advanced modernity – as ‘classical modernity’.

With this displacement, the relational character of these notions mobilised to express the historical consciousness of the present is still apparent. The significant relationship, however, is not between modernity and tradition anymore, but between our present time and what used to be defined as modernity. This relationship can be situated within two major interpretive orientations. One may re-evaluate the previous characteristics used to define modernity as not completely modern, or as corresponding to an historical phase of modernity that has been replaced by a new phase, as well as to the peculiar Western historical experience and trajectory, and we get late or advanced modernity or hypermodernity in temporal perspective, and varieties of modernity or multiple modernities or global modernity in spatial perspective. Alternatively, one may define modernity as a historically specific type of society, which is objectively undermined or being superseded, and we get postmodernity, whatever the evaluation one develops of this mutation.
The historical semantics of the term ‘modern’ and its derivatives

To better understand this displacement and to clarify the theoretical difficulties we are faced with when we use the notion of modernity today, it is necessary to place the present period in perspective and to examine the historical semantics of the notion. The etymology of the term (in Latin, modernus means ‘recent’, ‘current’) explains a strong tendency to associate what is ‘modern’ with the present time. But as Jauss (1982) and Koselleck (2004) have shown, the category of the modern is not simply a ‘timeless topos’ that has been regularly mobilised in theology, literature and the arts to mark a temporal distinction and designate what is new or what is of today. This category has actually always been used to thematise and problematise the relationship between the historical consciousness of the present and some normative reference, be it in the past or the future. It is thus connected with major changes in the ‘space of experience’ and the ‘horizon of expectation’ (Koselleck) of the elite groups of a society and major displacements in their historical consciousness, up to the present day.

Following the hermeneutic reconstruction developed by Jauss, it appears that the term ‘modern’ can be traced back to the 5th Century. It is first mobilised as an adjective to mark the ‘frontier of the actuality’ and to express an opposition between the present moment (modernus) and the past (whether it is the ecclesial past of the patres and their antiquis regulis or the pagan past of the Romano-Hellenistic culture of antiquity). It is then used as a noun to oppose two generations or two schools of thought, through the couple antiqui/moderni, which can already be found in philosophy in the 13th Century but which is especially well-known through the famous 17th Century ‘Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes’ in literature and the arts. These schools of thought can be contrasted in the course of time by the classic/modern eras. For instance in France, where classic referred not to Antiquity but to the so-called ‘classical’ canons fixed during the seventeenth century, especially under the reign of Louis XIV. With the autonomisation of literature and the arts in the second half of the nineteenth century, the relevant relationship and opposition to the modernist movement came increasingly from within. This is compared with the avant-garde movement, where each generation or school tried to go beyond the preceding one, in terms of a renewal that could be interpreted as a deepening and purification of the aesthetic expression.
If, from a purely formal and descriptive perspective, the modern can thus be successively opposed to the ancient, the classical, and itself, the historical semantics of the notion of modern is not at all linear (Habermas 1998). For the notion of the modern has been associated in the historical consciousness of European civilisation with the sense of a major rupture in universal history starting from the sixteenth century onwards, which progressively gave birth in the eighteenth century to a new historical period, distinguishing Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modern times. In this process, the category of the modern not only expressed the historical experience of radically new times, but also progressively conveyed a normative judgment of superiority, as may easily be seen in the notion of Enlightenment. Indeed, the adjective ‘modern’ and all its derivatives are not simply descriptive categories, but also highly normative ones. In this normative perspective, modernity has been associated with a claim to rationalisation, translated among other things into a claim to universality and a notion of progress. This normative dimension has been a central component of the relationships between social groups, societies and civilisations over the past centuries. It is inevitably part of our own relationship to history each time we use the notion. Given the history of the terms, mobilising the category of the modern cannot be simply a matter of description of social characteristics and dynamics, it also implies adopting a stance toward the history of the last centuries and the orientations of the present, be it affirmative or critical; since a critique of modernity, for instance in a Marxist vein, may remain fully committed to its normative ideals.

It is as a direct participant in this historical rupture and its intellectual and ideological refraction – even though the precise dating of the rupture varies considerably from one narrative to the next – that sociology will thematise what we now call ‘modern society’ or ‘modernity’, through a central opposition between modernity and tradition (equivalent in sociology to that between modern and ancient or classical in literature and

1 Until a new pairing, modern/postmodern, broke through in the 1960s. Here, modern is no longer synonymous with actual, present, but designates an orientation that is criticized, and by extension the period during which this orientation is supposed to have been dominant and which is coming to a welcome end from a postmodernist perspective. Doubtless there will very soon be attempts to rethink the modern after the postmodern (Meschonnic and Hasumi 2002), which will consider the postmodernist moment itself as part of the modern condition and history.

2 It is interesting to note in this context that the German term corresponding to what we call ‘the Modern times’ is Neuzeit.
the arts) that is explicitly or implicitly present in most of the general
typologies proposed in the 19th and 20th centuries, such as contract and
status (Maine), society and community (Tönnies), democratic principle
and hierarchical principle (Tocqueville), capitalist society and feudal
society (Marx), organic solidarity and mechanical solidarity (Durkheim),
legal-rational domination and traditional domination (Weber), achievement
and ascription (Parsons), or more recently individualism and holism
(Dumont).

The increasing confusions surrounding the notion
of modernity today

If we put together these different elements, we easily understand why
the use of the notion of modernity is so confusing today. First, given our
historical legacy on the one hand and the etymology of the term on the
other, the notion of modernity is marked by an intrinsic instability and a
permanent oscillation and tension between the reference to a specific
(although often quite vague) historical epoch and spatial localisation, that
of the West European civilisation, with its normative claims, its internal
dynamics and the history of its encounter with other societies and
civilisations, and the reference to the present virtually anywhere on the
planet, since any contemporary development different from the past may
be labeled as ‘modern’. It is thus easy to understand that whether we
consider modernity as starting around the 16th or 17th Century in Western
Europe or as referring basically to the main cultural orientations and forms
of organisation of today’s world, we will have very different
characterisations of the societal type we propose under this term.

This tension and oscillation is accentuated by the fact that an
increasing interval of time separates us from the ‘Modern times’ of the
European historian. In this process, we may have more and more difficulty
to understand the very ‘modernity’ of the so-called Modern times, given
our feeling of an acceleration of change and massive transformations at
work today in all the major domains of social life, to the point where we
may feel that up to recently we were only semi-modern (Beck 1992) or
that modernity is really beginning only today. Spatially as well, we have
the feeling of worldwide dynamics of transformation at work today, which
are not limited anymore to mainly Western societies. Instead, we consider
that more and more societies are modernising today and therefore that
modernity is at large (Appadurai 1996). Yet, since they do not seem to be
modernising at the same pace, and after the critique of evolutionism and
colonialism, the presently dominant social imagination tends to stress
difference and diversity rather than similarity and convergence. Some influential thinkers propose to develop the paradigm of *multiple modernities* (Taylor 1999; Eisenstadt 2002). A different orientation is taken by those who talk of *global modernity*, who insist rather on the idea that for the first time in universal history the whole of humanity is going to be unitised, through interdependencies and globalisation, and that major convergence dynamics may be observed (Inglehart 1997; Tiryakian 1991).

Most of these interpretations take more and more distance from Western societies and Western history, which were once treated as the obvious historical-empirical background of any ideal type of modernity and which are now considered as only a specific variety of the type. We could consider that this is perfectly understandable, and even extremely salutary, since this allows us to go beyond the previous forms of evolutionism or Eurocentrism and to consider that all societies and all social groups are today embedded in the modern world (Gilroy, 1993). The trouble is that there is a major risk that in this process, the very notion of modernity will lose the theoretical depth it used to have. Indeed, too many analyses conflate empirical with conceptual questions (Wittrock 2002), endlessly discussing all kinds of value orientations, patterns of behaviour, institutional configurations or societal trends and comparing them in time or in space to pinpoint evolutions, convergences and divergences, without ever explaining the relationship of these empirical questions to the concept of modernity, except through vague notions like individualism, democracy, market economy, or science and technology. In order to propose a theory of modernity, we cannot simply follow and describe the factual evidence of change, difference or convergence. Instead, we have to build an ideal type around a set of relatively precise characteristics and principles of structuration forming a coherent (which does not mean contradiction-free) whole, and to provide an account of the dynamics of transformation.

Another major source of confusion surrounding the use of the notion of modernity has to do with the normative connotations associated with the term ‘modern’ and its derivatives. Here again, we are confronted with the relational character of the notion, but in a different perspective. The relationship at stake is not that between our own time and the post-medieval period in Europe, nor that between the dynamics of transformation going on everywhere in today’s world and the European and then Western civilisational area, but the relationship between the analyst and his object of study, in the present case world history, as it is mediated by the semantic categories he uses to apprehend it.
First, we should not immediately confuse and conflate questions of historical diagnosis with questions of normative judgement. The historical diagnosis has to be based on a hermeneutic of structures and experience. If the concept of modernity designates a type of society, that is a set of structural characteristics endowed with a certain coherence, the first relevant concern is to explain on what bases these characteristics are established, and to assess whether the contemporary situation marks a continuity or a rupture with regard to the proposed type. Whatever the answer given, a second and distinct moment, which is more or less salient according to the interpretations and to the contexts in which they are developed, has to do with the judgement we develop about the structural traits thus underlined, whether one proposes a positive or a critical reading of them. It is from this double perspective that modernity must be apprehended sociologically, that is a descriptive-interpretive and a normative perspective, but without conflating the two. Of course, this distinction has a more analytical than sequential significance, since the very characterisation of a type of society frequently involves normative judgements (consider for instance the opposition between the labels ‘industrial society’ and ‘capitalist society’). However, we should always keep it in mind when we engage in a social-scientific analysis, which should be guided by a principle of detachment towards pure opinion or immediate political positions.

The pure and simple confusion between these two levels is extremely frequent, because the term modernity is heavily connoted. For numerous contemporary authors, keeping the term modernity to designate the present time represents a major stake, since postmodernity is associated in their mind with the rejection of rationalism and assimilated to cynicism and nihilism. Independently from any other consideration, it is thus much less problematic to talk of a post-industrial society than to talk of a postmodern society. This may then lead one to artificially maintain continuity where it does not exist. This is a major reason why it is important that sociologists actively participate in the debate about postmodernity and propose a proper sociological interpretation of societal transformations.

In order to concretise these remarks it may help us to develop a more sophisticated account of the advanced modernity/postmodernity debate. Let us build a two-dimensional table presenting the possible interpretive positions on the two perspectives I have distinguished. For each position, I have placed major authors in the current debate to illustrate the potential interest of such a classification, even though they do not always occupy a clear-cut or stable position according to books or periods in their intellectual production.
Table 1: Diagnostic and evaluative judgement in the debate on modernity and postmodernity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretation of current cultural and social transformations</th>
<th>Inflection within continuity with regard to modernity</th>
<th>Crisis of modernity and uncertainty as to the current orientations</th>
<th>Tendential rupture with modernity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Normative position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valorisation of modernity</td>
<td>1) Positive theories of advanced modernity</td>
<td>3) Modernist theories of modernity in crisis</td>
<td>5) Modernist critical theories of postmodernity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Giddens, Beck, Luhmann, Inglehart)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Bell)</td>
<td>(Habermas)³</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valorisation of postmodernity as contemporary reality</td>
<td>Contradictory position</td>
<td>Contradictory position</td>
<td>6) Affirmative theories of postmodernity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Jameson, Harvey)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Bauman, Maffesoli)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valorisation of an ideal to come</td>
<td>2) Critical theories of advanced modernity</td>
<td>4) Critical theories of modernity in crisis</td>
<td>7) Critical theories of postmodernity and of modernity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Jameson, Harvey)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Touraine, Wagner)</td>
<td>(Freitag)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I will now propose elements of a renewed theorisation, aiming to go beyond the above confusions.

**Elements of a renewed theorisation**

**The need for new macro-historical typologies**

Given all the sources of confusion attached to the notion of modernity, is it relevant to continue using it at all within sociological discourse? We could certainly conclude that it is not; that we should try to dispense with it altogether. As we have seen, it is more and more difficult while using the terminology of the modern to make a clear distinction between what relates to the specific societal form that originated in Western Europe after

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³ This refers in particular to Habermas’ famous theme of the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld by the system’ (Habermas 1984). Of course, Habermas could also be associated with position 1, if other orientations of his work were privileged.
Chapter Two

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the Renaissance and what relates to the societal forms characterising the contemporary world. Moreover, given the normative connotations associated with the term, continuing to use it today in the sociological discourse to interpret the present cannot be an innocent enterprise; except in routine usage where it only means ‘present’ or ‘current’. For all these reasons, we should probably not use the label ‘modernity’ anymore within the social sciences to designate types of society. I see two possible ways to do this. The first one would be to arbitrarily name for instance ‘civilisation R’ the type of society and civilisation that emerged in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards, so that it can neither be confused anymore with ‘anything contemporary’ nor with something ‘anywhere on the planet’. This would also sever any immediate link with the connotations of normative superiority implied by the term of ‘modernity’. Another advantage of replacing ‘modernity’ by ‘civilisation R’ is that it allows us to reintroduce the debate around postmodernity in a very different way, which is again much less passionate, in terms for instance of the hypothesis of a ‘civilisation S’ developing in the more recent period.

A second and certainly more fruitful, although more difficult, enterprise consists in developing a completely renewed typology of post-traditional societies. This typology must be multidimensional, based on a synthetic interpretation of societal forms and not on a list of features such as technology, formal market economy and representative democracy, and the like. It must be abstract enough to allow for change and to cover a number of variable patterns, but at the same time distinct and precise enough to allow for discrimination between types. It must be free from evolutionism and Eurocentrism, while being able to present a coherent account of world-historical transformations and to integrate the ideological orientations which have been an integral part of the European historical consciousness and of its relations with the other societies and civilisations up to the present day. The elaboration of this renewed typology constitutes in my view a very promising research agenda for historical and comparative sociology.

Three basic distinctions

Until we build such a renewed typology, however, we can hardly dispense with the notion of modernity. We can, however, be much more careful than before with the way we use it with a sociological intent. To begin with, three basic distinctions must be made. First, we have to distinguish ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’, the product of the present day. If we want to give modernity conceptual content, we should not accept as self-evident that we all live in modernity today, because there is a
worldwide diffusion of what we routinely call ‘modern’ technology, ‘modern’ economy, ‘modern’ ways of life, ‘modern’ consumer items, and so on. In all these usages, modern simply means contemporary, and in this sense, a sociology of modernity ends up being nothing other than an analysis of social change. In the same sense, we have to distinguish ‘modern’ from ‘not traditional anymore’. To say that all cultural and institutional patterns are modern because all societies are modernising amounts to a massive tautology, through a reversal of the logical reasoning; instead of defining modernisation as the process of implementation of modernity, one defines modernity as any end-product of continuous change, routinely labeled as modernisation. Modernity has to be defined as a type of society and civilisation, and if it does have any theoretical meaning, this type cannot be defined in such abstract or vague terms that any non-traditional society or any present-day feature fits into it. Third, we have to distinguish modernity and so-called ‘Western civilisation’, considered either as a specific, deep-seated cultural code alien to other parts of the world or as a political and ideological marker of hegemony. If what we understand by modernity is a type of society and civilisation originating in Western Europe, it is neither reducible to a culture among others nor to a history of domination. Its cultural and institutional premises and orientations can potentially be developed and appropriated by any society and it should not be equated with Westernisation in a cultural or hegemonic sense.

Integrating the normative connotations of modernity in the analysis

In connection with these distinctions, the normative dimension associated with the notion of modernity should be integrated into our approach to modernity, in two respects. First, this dimension is intrinsic to our object of study, and we have to include it in our interpretation. Modernity refers to a history, which cannot be undone, and for this reason the notion cannot be defined arbitrarily. If we want to give this notion a sociological meaning, we have to elaborate it through a hermeneutic and historical approach where the normative orientations underlying the institutions of society have to be accounted for. Modernity cannot be reduced to a list of characteristics, such as a market economy, a democratic political system and scientifically-based technology. It has to include the social imagination and cultural-ideological orientations which ground these characteristics in deep conceptual changes and integrate them into a type of society (Wittrock 2002). Secondly, this normative
dimension is also part of our relationship to our object of study and should make us aware of the impossibility to separate radically in any sociological interpretation of history and the present time an explanatory model, a coding and a narrative (Alexander, 1995). Any macro-sociological interpretation belongs at the same time to the social-scientific sphere and to the larger intellectual sphere, since it cannot simply pretend to explain in a distant and neutral way the social world and its history, but constitutes a reading grid of reality which gives coherence and orientation, through analytic units, conceptual schema and theoretical elaboration, which are always disputed. Social theory must not be considered simply as an explanatory discourse, but also as a general intellectual discourse aiming at interpreting the world, at giving it meaning, at situating the epoch and the society we live in by contrast with and opposition to others. This dimension of the discourse cannot be eliminated and separated from its 'properly scientific' one, because it cannot be reduced to ideology. Thus, any interpretation functions as a ‘meaning structure’ which codes and narrates the socio-historical world. The sociologist, and especially the macro-sociologist, cannot be a neutral observer. He is at the same time an observer and a participant, willingly or not, consciously or not involved in the normative dimension of his object of study, for there is no such thing as a pure description or a neutral position of observation. We have to include reflexively in our theoretical elaborations: the fundamental idea that the notion of modernity (or postmodernity for that matter) is not a label that transparently designates the real, but a self-referential semantic construction through which we at once explain societal characteristics and dynamic links, narrate social and cultural transformations in a certain way, and code them positively or negatively. Thus, any interpretation functions as a ‘meaning structure’ which codes and narrates the socio-historical world. The sociologist, and especially the macro-sociologist, cannot be a neutral observer. He is at the same time an observer and a participant, willingly or not, consciously or not involved in the normative dimension of his object of study, for there is no such thing as a pure description or a neutral position of observation. We have to include reflexively in our theoretical elaborations: the fundamental idea that the notion of modernity (or postmodernity for that matter) is not a label that transparently designates the real, but a self-referential semantic construction through which we at once explain societal characteristics and dynamic links, narrate social and cultural transformations in a certain way, and code them positively or negatively. 

Scales, phases, varieties

Another important question for any renewed theorisation of modernity has to do with the scale of reference of our macro-sociological interpretations. We have to include reflexively in our theorisation the multiplicity of possible scales – either historical or geographical – and therefore the multiplicity of possible accounts of modernity (or

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4 Luhmann (1998) has rightly insisted on this inevitably self-referential character of any interpretation of modernity.
postmodernity). Here again, we have to elaborate and discuss historical periodisations and geographical scales in a reasoned way, through a hermeneutic perspective, while being aware of the fact that the scales and coordinates of reference are always redefined in the course of history. Within our scales of reference, we may perfectly well distinguish phases of modernity in the temporal dimension or varieties of modernity in the spatial dimension.

This question of scales, phases and varieties has been revived recently by the growing audience of a recent theoretical paradigm, usually labeled ‘multiple modernities’, which aims to redefine modernity with the clear intent to relativise the Western trajectory and to acknowledge the multiplicity of so-called modernisation processes marking the contemporary world, characterised by heterogeneity and divergence as much as by similarity and convergence. To talk of multiple modernities is however not the same thing as to talk of varieties of modernity (Schmidt 2006) and confuses the idea of variety within a type with the idea of different types. This theoretical confusion can itself be explained, in my view, by confusion between ‘post-traditional’ and ‘modern’. In order to clarify this matter, I propose to distinguish four different analytical levels within a macro-sociological perspective.

Four analytical levels

Whether we adhere to it or not, the hypothesis of postmodernity forces us to stop reasoning within a dualist frame opposing modernity to tradition and considering as obvious that ‘moving out’ of tradition means ‘entering’ modernity, if we are ready to admit that postmodernity, however one defines it, is itself a post-traditional manifestation. A way out of this mode of reasoning consists in establishing a clear distinction between what concerns types of society and what relates to a deeper anthropological level of structuring of social relations and individual subjectivity, a level which I propose to name ‘symbolic universe’. One can then propose to distinguish within universal history two major types of symbolic universe, traditional and post-traditional. What Weber analysed under the notion of the disenchantment of the world corresponds to what is here meant by post-traditional universe, that is a fundamental ontological and anthropological mutation which unsettled first the European civilisation, then progressively the whole world, with regard to the cognitive, affective and normative frameworks that structure our relation to ourselves, others and the world. The central hypothesis is that we are moving out of a symbolic universe structured in its entirety by tradition and religion,
whatever the more or less important role tradition and religion play in the actual structuring of social relations and in individual beliefs and practices (Gauchet 1999). A post-traditional symbolic universe is not necessarily a world without tradition and religion, but a world in which they change their status, at both the individual and collective level, and are subject to interrogation (Giddens 1994). In this sense, traditionalism and fundamentalism are clearly post-traditional phenomena, as well as new forms of communalism based on various references, such as ethno-racial ones. Therefore, instead of opposing traditional and modern societies, I propose to oppose traditional and post-traditional symbolic universes, each symbolic universe allowing for multiple forms of societies and tendencies. We should therefore, in my view, not speak of multiple modernities, but of multiple post-traditional societies, exactly like when we distinguish for instance kingdoms, empires, city-states, feudal systems and caste systems as different types of traditional forms of social and political organisation.

Whereas the distinction between traditional and post-traditional symbolic universes is situated on a ‘deep’ anthropological level, the opposition between advanced modernity and postmodernity falls into the classical sociological enterprise of distinguishing types of society and civilisation through a set of cultural and structural characteristics. Modernity or postmodernity is defined as a type of society and civilisation, which may include historical phases, as well as variable paths of realisation, but within certain limits, lest it looses all conceptual relevance. Again, the hypothesis of postmodernity is stimulating, because in the same way that it forbids continuing reasoning within the dualist frame of the opposition between tradition and modernity, it forbids immediately confusing modern and actual or contemporary; and thus requires a much more rigorous use of the notion of modernity on the part of those who intend to contest this hypothesis and to claim that we are still, if not ever more than before, within modernity. The notion of modernity can assume conceptual relevance only if it designates something other than the current empirical endpoint of social change anywhere on the planet.6

5 My significant divergence with Giddens lies in the fact that he identifies ‘post-traditional’ and ‘modern’, whereas I propose to situate them on two different analytical levels.
6 This implies ceasing to reason upside down, as do numerous interpreters who, instead of defining the notion of ‘modernisation’ as the process of implementation of modernity (understood as a set of principles, cultural orientations and institutions characterising a type of organisation of social relations), designate as modern any product of social change, routinely named modernisation. In this respect, the introduction of the term ‘postmodernisation’ to name a process of
Two other planes of analysis concern *the historical and spatial frames*, respectively, in which a given type of symbolic universe or a given type of society takes place. Until very recently, these frames have been defined from the history of Western Europe and then so-called Western societies, with only secondary divergences over the precise starting point of modernity, varying according to the readings from the 16th (Renaissance, Reformation, birth of the nation-state) to the 19th century (industrial capitalism). In all the cases, the geographical frame of the post-traditional symbolic universe and of modernity was given both by the politico-territorial model of the nation-state and by an opposition between the West and its other, which was associated in terms of disciplines with a partition between sociology (modern societies) and ethnology (traditional societies), and on a geopolitical level with the development of colonialism and imperialism.

The current debates around advanced modernity and postmodernity must here again lead us to distinguish as clearly as possible the different planes of analysis. We can thus talk of the contemporary period to designate from a historical viewpoint the present time and the idea of inflection or of mutation accompanying it according to the readings, ceasing to associate a priori the contemporary period with modernity to make of this articulation an open question. On a geographical level, we may develop the hypothesis of a worldwide diffusion of the post-traditional symbolic universe, with varying degrees of intensity, while keeping the question of types of society much more open. Neither the enlargement to all the societies on the planet of intensified dynamics of transformation nor globalisation necessarily signify by themselves the correlative diffusion of modernity as a type of society, although they do not signify any more, as such, a postmodern mutation. Within the tradition of macro-historical comparative sociology, modernity designates a type of society born in Europe around the 16th or 17th century, and it is only on the basis of a theory starting from this historic first occurrence of a new type of society that any interpretation of contemporary transformation can get its credibility. This must lead us to adopt with a lot of caution some notions in the air such as modernity at large, global modernity or multiple modernities. This must also lead us to clearly distinguish the topic of modernity from that of globalisation, as Robertson (1996) rightly stresses.

The following table summarises the proposed distinctions. These different considerations and distinctions should help, in my view, to get out of this confusion and to clarify the issue.
develop a renewed theorisation of modernity until we are able to propose a completely renewed typology of post-traditional societies. In this perspective, I will first discuss the hypothesis of a post-traditional universe, then the opposition between the interpretations in terms of advanced modernity and postmodernity, aiming to show that we have to go beyond this formal opposition if we want to discuss substantial questions about the characteristics and dynamics of today’s world.

Table 2: Four different analytical levels of a macro-sociological approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical Periodisation</th>
<th>Type of symbolic universe</th>
<th>Type of society</th>
<th>Spatial configuration and geopolitical relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-modern times</td>
<td>Traditional symbolic universe</td>
<td>Traditional Societies</td>
<td>Variable extent, most of the time limited, except in the case of traditional empires (but weak capacities of control and transformation). Importance of proximal social relations (parenthood, local community).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fidelity to the past, narrow articulation between tradition and religion, major and massive impact on ways of thought, practices and social relations.</td>
<td>Can be declined in various subtypes, on a diachronic or comparative basis.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern times</td>
<td>Post-traditional symbolic universe</td>
<td>Modernity</td>
<td>Frame of the nation-state, first in Western Europe, then in so-called Western countries. Opposition between « the West » and « the rest ». Colonial expansion and imperialism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deep mutation in the symbolic economy of societies and modes of construction of subjectivity, disenchantment of the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the perspective of European historiography.