

Modernity

Understanding the present

Peter Wagner



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To Asteris Stefan

Modernity

Understanding the Present

Peter Wagner

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Preface

Fifty years ago, the globe was neatly divided into three areas: the First World of liberal-democratic industrial capitalism, the Second World of Soviet-style socialism, and the Third World of so-called developing countries. Within the First World, there was a clear view about how to understand the present of the time. The First World only was composed of 'modern societies', which were superior to all others because they had institutionalized freedom and had developed an institutional differentiation according to functional needs. In this view, the Second World societies had embarked on an erroneous path which they could only maintain at the risk of perishing in the system competition with the First World; and the societies of the Third World were in the process of following the First one in processes of 'modernization and development'. Only First World societies, thus, were modern in the sense of being in their own time. The Second World had aimed to create its own, specific future but necessarily failed; and the Third World needed to catch up to reach the present. This was the time when our sociological thinking about 'modern society' and 'modernization' emerged as an extremely coherent attempt at understanding the present of that time.

But it is no longer our time – and arguably no longer our modernity. The world has changed considerably and much beyond the sociological imagination of anyone writing in the 1960s.

The western societies of the 1960s were 'industrial societies', built on the innovations of the so-called Second Industrial Revolution, with electrical engineering, chemical engineering and the combustion engine, and the possibility of a 'post-industrial society' just beginning to be considered. Now, we speak of knowledge societies in the wake of a Third Industrial Revolution based on electronic engineering and

producing the new information and communication technologies that enhance global interconnectedness.

During the 1960s, governments believed in crisis-free national economies that were steered by Keynesian demand management techniques. Now, most of the economic policy institutions of that time have been dismantled in the wake of a new belief in market self-regulation, and the global capitalism that resulted from this change has already entered into a deep crisis, comparable only to the Great Depression of 1929, which many economists thought was the last one ever. And, across the last half-century, we have also witnessed the rise of regional economies to world competitiveness – first Japan, then Taiwan and South Korea, now China, to mention only a few – that are not based in the cultural context of Protestantism and its social ethic which many sociologists had considered a requirement.

The 1960s were the peak of the era of decolonization, witnessing the rapid dismantling of European empires, but it was expected that the new states and societies would emulate the western model and, given that they were ‘late’, would keep lagging somewhat behind. Now, we know that liberation from western dominance can also mean a fundamental challenge to the model of modernization, as in the case of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the rise of Islamism, or at least the emergence of distinct varieties of modernity, for the creation of which local problem-solving is more important than the look to the West. The new powers in the world – such as China, India, Brazil and South Africa – emerge from different historical trajectories, such as experiences of a regional version of communism, colonial domination, extreme inequality in an entrenched oligarchic setting or apartheid, and their ‘modernities’ are bound to be shaped by those experiences, and sometimes now their choices are seen as models to be emulated elsewhere.

Of the changes over the last fifty years, democratization is the one that was most predicted – modern societies were supposed to be democratic polities – but both the speed of change after a long period of persistent authoritarianism in the world (benevolently viewed by western powers, we should add) and its consequences were highly unexpected. Political scientists now speak of ‘waves of democratization’ as something self-evident, and they refer to the end of military dictatorships in Southern Europe in the 1970s, followed by South Korea and Latin America, and then the demise of Soviet-style socialism in Eastern Europe from 1989, the end of apartheid in South Africa during the same years, and now the democratic movements in Northern Africa and the Middle East, which still have to bring democratic regimes about. Two aspects tend to be forgotten when seeing something like a natural process at work in democratization. First, the world of the 1960s appeared neat and stable largely because it was undemocratic. The United States of America feared democracy in Latin America; Europe feared democracy in the Muslim Maghreb; the ‘modern’ Kemalist government in Turkey feared Islamic and Kurdish expression in its own society; Israel feared democracy in Palestine; and these fears are far from over. When global modernity becomes truly based on collective self-determination, the world will have changed. Second, democracy in the 1960s meant collective self-determination within the well-defined boundaries of nation-states, and the assumption was that such societies could indeed determine their own destiny because they were separate and distinguishable from other societies in the world. Now we may have more democratically constituted societies, but global interdependence may mean that those collectivities have very little to indeed decide and determine.

In sum, technology, economy and politics have changed beyond recognition in the world over the past half-century. If

a part of the world was seen as a 'modern society' then, its modernity was radically different from the modernity of our present. If other parts of the world then were seen as having to face 'modernization', they have interpreted this challenge often in very different ways from those expected. For these reasons, an attempt at understanding our present time cannot rely on the tools and concepts of even such a seemingly recent past as that of the 1960s. This book thus aims to provide a renewed reflection about modernity with a view to better understanding our present time.

For a long time, it was common to think that modernity originated in the West and that it opened up a new and better era in the history of humanity. This book returns to these claims but discusses them in the light of the current global nature of modernity. Modernity's claims and expectations have become inescapable in evermore walks of life and for many more people than before. In the course of their realization and diffusion, however, these claims and expectations have also been radically transformed. Newly arising issues will need to be discussed by posing the following questions:

- Sociologists and philosophers have long maintained that there is – indeed, that there can be – only a single model of modernity. However, modern institutions and practices have been transformed over time, and furthermore there is now a plurality of forms of modern socio-political organization. What does this entail for our idea of progress, or, in other words, for our hope that the future world can be better than the present one?
- Modernity was based on the hope of freedom and reason, but it created the institutions of contemporary capitalism and democracy. How does the freedom of the citizen relate to the freedom of the buyer and seller today? And what does disaffection with capitalism and democracy entail for the sustainability of modernity?

- All nuance and broadening notwithstanding, our concept of modernity is in some way inextricably tied to the history of Europe and the West. How can we compare different forms of modernity in a 'symmetric', non-biased or non-Eurocentric way? How can we develop a world sociology of modernity?

The reflections in this book are based on an approach to 'modernity as experience and interpretation' which I had tried to elaborate as a rather novel way of linking comparative-historical sociology to social and political philosophy. The questions above were in the background of my earlier writing (Wagner 2008), but they had not yet been explicitly addressed. The answers I now hope to give to them can be found in this book. The current constellation of modernity forces us to reconsider our ways of theorizing it. This will be done in the first part of the book. The second part will embark on analyses of key aspects of our present time with the help of a revised understanding of modernity, as elaborated on in the first part.

Chapter 1 discusses the global nature of modernity by way of a brief review of key ideas of modernity from the point of view of the present. The thinking about modernity has always aimed at the global and the universal. Modernity was seen as normatively and functionally superior to other forms of socio-political organization. Universal claims were made in its name, and its worldwide diffusion was expected. It is now, however, in our era of so-called globalization, of radical time-space compression, that these claims and expectations become truly inescapable. But they have to be read differently after centuries of experience of translating them into socio-political practices. Subsequently, chapter 2 elaborates systematically on the recent change in perceptions of modernity. It focuses on two key issues: rather than seeing 'modern societies' converge to a single institutional expression, many observers now identify a

persistent plurality of modern forms of socio-political organization. Secondly, rather than seeing 'modern societies' as basically stable once their full institutional expression has been reached, most observers now agree that modernity has been undergoing quite radical change from at least the 1970s onwards.

The new concerns with persistent plurality and possibly profound transformations of modernity open up further questions. Chapter 3 investigates if and how we can sustain the idea of progress that has long informed the debate about modernity if modernity has more than one shape and goes on changing. Finally, chapter 4 suggests that a new understanding of modernity needs to build on the insight in the contingency of historical developments. The history of modernity is not a smooth unfolding of basic ideas and principles as they move towards concretization in historical reality. Rather, it is a struggle over the interpretation of such ideas and principles, a struggle in the course of which central problems of human social life need to be addressed and in which any solution to these problems may engender new problems to be addressed in the future.

The reasoning in the first part of this book uses historical and contemporary examples wherever possible, but it does so with a view to elaborating a novel understanding of modernity. The approach changes in the second part. From chapter 5 onwards, the focus will be on the trajectories of modernity in different parts of the world, with a view to seeing clearly how modern world-views have changed societies and how we have arrived at the current constellation of modernity. Conceptual reasoning will now be in the service of understanding historical change.

Chapter 5 explores the relationship between what arguably have been the core institutions of modernity – or imaginaries of modern institutions – over the past two centuries, namely, capitalism and democracy. It will

demonstrate that, whatever 'logic' of capitalism and of democracy there may be, the political and economic history of those two centuries is better grasped by focusing on the articulation between the two phenomena, on the challenges that capitalism posed for democracy and those that democracy posed for capitalism. The aim of this exercise is to provide an understanding of the peculiar situation of the present in which a globally diffused capitalism seems to be aligned with unstoppable processes of 'democratization', but in which both political and economic institutions are highly crisis-ridden.

From the analysis of core institutions of modernity in chapter 5, our reasoning moves on to systematically explore in chapter 6 the varieties of modern self-understandings that have emerged globally. This chapter begins with the insight into the persistent plurality of modern forms, as discussed in chapter 2, and offers an approach for analysing this plurality comparatively, based on the conceptual reflections in chapter 4. While being global in outlook, the focus of this chapter will be on two 'post-colonial' societies, Brazil and South Africa, that have rarely been studied in terms of modernity and will provide the tools for comparing their 'modernities' with the European one that has traditionally been at the centre of the analysis of modernity. Chapter 7 will deepen the analysis of South Africa. The task of this case study is to show how to address a key question that emerges when we conceive of modernity in plural terms: what are the aspects that all modernities have in common and what marks the singularity of any particular modernity? With these reflections, all the tools are in hand to conclude the book by outlining the contours of a world sociology of modernity that is capable of helping us to understand our present time. This will be done in chapter 8.

This book would not have existed without the occasion that first solicited it, the Nordic Summer University in

Tyriðfjord, Norway, in July 2009. Therefore, I would like to express my thanks to the organizers, and in particular to Ingerid Straume, for providing the occasion on which to reflect anew about the ways in which social and political thought and research can help understanding of our present condition (an earlier and shorter version of my lectures appeared as the 'summer talks' of NSU). Thanks are also due to Mikael Carleheden for asking for a contribution to an issue of *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal for Social Theory* on 'successive modernities', which has been the starting point for the reflections in chapter 3. A first version of chapter 2 was written while lecturing at the Université catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve in March 2010, and I would like to thank Jean de Munck for having created this occasion. The thoughts about novel ways of comparing modernities, contained in chapters 4 and 6, have appeared in an early form in an issue of the *European Journal of Social Theory* which was devoted to the work of Johann Arnason who has been a discussant for matters of modernity for more than ten years now. Chapter 8 originated as a contribution to a volume honouring the work of Björn Wittrock to whom the same applies for more than a quarter-century. Chapter 5 goes back to a keynote lecture given at the conference of the International Social Theory Consortium, organized at the University of Sussex in June 2010 by Gerard Delanty and Stephen Turner. Chapter 7 draws on my contribution to the fiftieth anniversary issue of *Social Science Information/Information sur les sciences sociales*. Parts of chapter 1 also appear in the *Encyclopedia of Globalization*, edited by George Ritzer (2012) and parts of chapter 2 have appeared in the *Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political Theory*, edited by Gerard Delanty and Stephen Turner (2011).

More thanks: work on this book, in particular on the second part, has greatly benefited from funding by the

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If this book differs from my preceding one by having a wider horizon, in both the geographical and the figurative sense, this is to an inestimable extent due to Nathalie Karagiannis.

Bellaterra, 27 June 2011

Part I: Re-theorizing Modernity 1

Retrieving Modernity's Past, Understanding Modernity's Present

The most common – even though far from unproblematic – view about modernity holds that this term refers to a novel kind of society that emerged from a sequence of major transformations in Europe and North America, culminating in the industrial and democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Significantly, this view often entails both that these transformations catapulted Europe (or the West) to the front position in the course of world history and that the thus established western model would diffuse worldwide because of its inherent superiority. Thinking about modernity thus meant thinking about globalization, even though these terms have come into frequent use only since the 1980s and 1990s respectively.

Global – or universal – significance was claimed for European modernity from the very beginning. A key event in the formation of what we consider to be modern Europe was the so-called discovery of the Americas with their hitherto unknown populations, and this event triggered European reflections about the nature of humankind and provided a

background to philosophical speculations about the 'state of nature', as in John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* (1690). From René Descartes's *Discourse on Method* (1637) onwards, Enlightenment thought claimed to have established the very few, but absolutely firm, foundations on which universal knowledge could be erected, most basically freedom and reason. The American and French Revolutions were seen as having inescapably introduced humanity to liberal democracy, based on individual rights and popular sovereignty. Already in his *Democracy in America* of the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville considered equal universal suffrage the *telos* of political history. And from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) to the mid-nineteenth century, political economists claimed to have discovered in market self-regulation an absolutely superior form of economic organization. In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels provided an image of economic globalization whose evocative power has not been surpassed.

A common basic understanding of modernity underlies this debate, which stretches over more than two centuries and addresses very different aspects of human social life. Modernity is the belief in the freedom of the human being – natural and inalienable, as many philosophers presumed – and in the human capacity to reason, combined with the intelligibility of the world, that is, its amenability to human reason. In a first step towards concreteness, this basic commitment translates into the principles of individual and collective self-determination and in the expectation of ever-increasing mastery of nature and ever more reasonable interaction between human beings. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1793), as well as the granting of commercial freedom, can be understood as an application of these underlying principles of modernity, as

can the technical transformations captured by the term 'industrial revolution'.

These principles were seen as *universal*, on the one hand, because they contained normative claims to which, one presumed, every human being would subscribe and, on the other, because they were deemed to permit the creation of functionally superior arrangements for major aspects of human social life, most importantly maybe the satisfaction of human needs in market-driven, industrial production and the rational government of collective matters through law-based and hierarchically organized administration. Furthermore, they were seen as *globalizing* in their application because of the interpretative and practical power of normativity and functionality.

None of these claims, however, was straightforwardly accepted. Even though the intellectual commitment to these principles was possibly widespread, considerable doubts existed about the possibility or probability of translating these principles into institutional arrangements without considerable modifications and losses. Among the early critical reflections, only two shall be mentioned. Immanuel Kant was committed to the idea of enlightened and accountable government and expected the republican principle (though not the democratic one) to flourish worldwide. However, he did not believe in what might have been considered the crowning of this process, the creation of a world republic, but argued for the normative superiority of a global federation of republics instead (*On Perpetual Peace*, 1795). Karl Marx's 'critique of political economy' (thus the subtitle of *Capital*, 1867), in turn, undermined the belief that the transformation of the human being into a market agent was based on the principles of liberty and equality, as political economy had suggested. Rather, this novel social formation, which he referred to as bourgeois society, divided humankind into two classes, the owners of