Modernity as Experience and Interpretation

A New Sociology of Modernity

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Modernity as Experience and Interpretation
To Ariadne Lou
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In the afternoon of 25 August 2007 the skies darkened over Arcadia. Fires were destroying vast areas of the Peloponnese and had created smoke clouds that turned the sunlight orange and gave the apocalyptic impression of a very early dusk. More than sixty people died in the fires. A state of emergency and a day of national mourning were declared in the country.

The summer of 2007 had been characterized by extraordinarily high temperatures in the south of Europe, going often far beyond forty degrees centigrade. This phenomenon was generally attributed to global warming, the persistent rise of temperature due to irresponsible human activity on the earth. But it was also clear that fire was unlikely to break out accidentally in so many places at the same time. It was widely assumed, and could sometimes be documented, that the fires were deliberately started, most likely for reasons of individual profit-seeking, to turn protected reserves into buildable land, but other more politically targeted strategies are not ruled out.

The darkening of the skies over Arcadia offers a sign of our contemporary modernity swinging out of its always precarious balance. The inability to halt the process of global warming that will make ever larger parts of the earth uninhabitable shows that the notion of a common world, which needs common measures to be preserved, has been radically weakened or has even withered away. If the pursuit of individual gain was the driving force of the arsonists, as the most probable explanation suggests, then so little sense for the common exists that a small individual advantage is seen to justify destruction of a highly valuable, almost irreplaceable common good. If fires were set for strategic political advantage – a rather less likely reason – then
‘the public thing’ itself barely figures on the mind of those who committed these deeds, be they Greek or international actors.

All of those accounts capture aspects of our modernity, and none of them is specific to this example and to this region of the world. To be modern means to see oneself as autonomous; it means to reject any source external to oneself as a guide to one’s action. Whoever sets incendiary devices, be it by igniting them in a forest of the Peloponnese or be it by refusing a signature to the Kyoto agreement, is likely to justify their action only by reference to their own will, by no source outside of themselves. Such a modern self-understanding found its first strong expression in the ancient Greek city republics, most importantly Athens, not far from Arcadia, and also burning these days. These republics were strongly committed to collective self-determination, to a radical concept of autonomy, in which there was no brake to the will of the collectivity – and sometimes this meant the ruin of the city.

In ancient Greece, two elements existed that are rather absent today and that mark a significant difference between this early manifestation of modernity and our own. Even though the ancient Greeks did not accept any ruler over them, first, they knew about the precarious nature of their modernity and they had a term for its most important peril: hubris. When human strivings hubristically overreached the capacity to master the consequences of one’s action, then life in common was at risk. And even though, second, the ancient Greeks recognized the dangers created by over-ambitious individuals and had a means to counteract those, namely ostracism, expulsion from the polity, they did not see these dangers as the most significant ones because ruthless and instrumental individualism, which is so frequent in our world, was absent in theirs. Greek modernity knew and cherished the expression of personal freedom but it was based on the idea of collective autonomy, and individual ambition was unlikely to upset this way of ruling the common life.

Our current modernity is clearly different. Individual liberty and instrumental action are not only driving forces that are recognizable in all walks of life, the fires in Arcadia being only one dramatic example among many others. They are even hailed as the epitome of modernity in sophisticated accounts of social and political theory. The aims of this book, which I was about to finish on 25 August 2007 in an Arcadian village, are, first, to understand this aspect of our contemporary modernity and, second, to suggest that modernity, even today, can be otherwise.

Maybe one is always rewriting the same book, but the situation changes and thus the words. My first writing about interpretations of
modernity, without using exactly those terms, was a comparative political sociology of the European social sciences (published as Sozialwissenschaften und Staat in 1990). This was during the second half of the 1980s and there was a sense that modernity was undergoing radical changes, but the existing words for them were highly inappropriate. My second attempt (A Sociology of Modernity, 1994) tried to approach the question of our contemporary modern condition through a historical sociology of transformations of European modernity over the past two centuries, an analysis of ‘successive modernities’ as Johann Arnason would later call it. This was after 1989 and the fall of existing socialism; and it was also after I had first left the European continent and had gained direct experience of North American modernity. The words given to this analysis mostly stemmed from some kind of thick historical description and stayed close to the experiences of continental Western Europe. To fully spell out their meanings, my third attempt tried to take some distance from this ‘case’ and widen the conceptual horizon (Theorizing Modernity, 2001). This move suggested to me even more strongly that modernity could be, indeed had to be, analysed in terms of plurality and of possibility. As necessary as this step may have been in times of supposed pensée unique, of neo-liberal hegemony, as I still think, it may have conveyed too little a sense of the limits to possibility in history and invited too general and too abstract an idea of the contingency of modernity. The current work tries to remedy this imbalance by reintroducing the specificity of the experiences of modernity and to relate existing interpretations of modernity to those experiences.

As it happened, much of the research for this book was pursued at the European University Institute in Fiesole. EUI is in many respects a most privileged place for a researcher in the social sciences. If there is any place where the ‘new sociology’ I am proposing, a truly interdisciplinary endeavour in terms of current disciplines, should flourish, then this should be there where the transcending of national intellectual horizons is more easily possible than elsewhere. In particular, in my opinion, EUI should be the place where constructive work at a reassessment of European modernity with a view to the contemporary global context could take place. However close or not EUI may have come to live up to its promise, I am glad to have had the opportunity to work there for eight years and to develop much of what follows in this book. In particular, I had the good luck to work with the historian Bo Stråth for much of the time on an interdisciplinary research programme analysing European modernity. I am very grateful to him for his intellectual and institutional companionship. The outcomes of our common work, we hope, will also be available in
book form very soon. Most importantly, I take this opportunity to thank the doctoral researchers of EUI with whom many of the following ideas were shared and developed in numerous seminars, workshops and conferences.

From 2003 to 2006, my research also benefited from generous support by the Volkswagen Foundation programme, ‘Key themes in the humanities’, for the working group on ‘Modernity and contingency’, which I co-directed. This group possibly did not realize all of its immense potential, but it enabled me to reflect anew on my ideas about significant experiences and their interpretation in European history in the framework of workshops on the period around 1800, the First World War and ‘1968’. Traces of these discussions will be found throughout this volume.

This book is being finished just after I have started teaching and researching at the University of Trento. I would like to thank my colleagues there for granting me an extended summer period to conclude the writing. I look forward to discussing the outcome with them.

Nathalie Karagiannis’s presence in the following text is stronger than any word in this preface can express.

Melana, August 2007
Ways of Understanding Modernity

1

Modernity as experience and interpretation: the agenda

We are all modern today. The idea that modernity could come to an end, strongly proposed for several years from the 1970s onwards and, as one may think, anticipated by Clov in Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* of 1957, has not been found convincing. Rather, we may have witnessed a grand revival of modernity during the 1980s and 1990s, covering now the entire globe and gradually reaching towards each and every individual, as the theorems of globalization and individualization suggest.

But modernity today is not what it used to be. Modernity was associated with the open horizon of the future, with unending progress towards a better human condition brought about by a radically novel and unique institutional arrangement. This expectation arose in the decades around 1800, as revealed by the analysis of conceptual change in political language, pioneered by the late Reinhart Koselleck from the 1960s onwards and in different ways by Michel Foucault and Quentin Skinner. And it found one significant expression in the
evolutionist strands of the social sciences, first during the nineteenth century and then in the sociological theories of modernization during the 1950s and 1960s. But there is nothing on the horizon of the future today, and even the question of what there should be remains unanswered.

Thus, maybe we are modern in different ways today – in a different way than we used to be until the 1960s, and also in a variety of different ways at the same time. This is a theme that has been addressed in recent years in an increasingly persistent manner under headings such as ‘multiple modernities’, ‘successive modernities’ or ‘alternative modernities’. My own Sociology of Modernity (1994) tried to give an account of the transformations of West European modernity over the past two centuries and make some comparative glimpses on the different modernities of the USA and of Soviet socialism. The argument remains plausible, I would maintain. But it has made inroads in neither scholarly nor public debates. Recent sociological analysis of modernity by and large only accepts that the moderns needed to make some adjustments in the light of the problems they themselves had produced. Modernity thus became reflexive, rethinking its own achievements and failures (Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck); or flexible networks are said to have replaced, or at least complemented, the iron cages of modern life (Manuel Castells, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello). Public debate, in turn, sees modernist globalization taking its course, resisted only by marginal movements in its centres and by fundamentalists at its peripheries.

To say that we have remained modern, but are so in a different way today, is, however, not satisfactory.¹ It begs the question about that which is variable in modernity and how change in modernity occurs. The aim of this book is to provide an answer to this question. Its basic assumptions can be spelt out in a rather straightforward manner:

*Modernity is a way in which human beings conceive of their lives.* As such, it needs to address the questions of how to govern life in common; how to satisfy human needs; and how to establish valid knowledge.

*Modernity’s specificity is the commitment to autonomy:* to giving oneself one’s own law. Thus, the modern answers to those questions cannot be derived from any external source of authority. By implication, any answer proposed is open to critique and contestation.

*There is no single uniquely modern answer to those questions:* much of the philosophy of modernity, from Immanuel Kant to Jürgen
Habermas, tried to find such a unique answer. Much of the sociology of modernity, from Emile Durkheim to Talcott Parsons to recent neo-modernization theories, claimed to have identified the one institutional structure of society that is specifically modern. However, the very transformations that modernity keeps undergoing suggest that there is a variety of modern answers to those questions.

The difference between varieties of modernity is a difference in the answers given to those questions: such difference is often certainly related to the cultural background against which modern answers are developed – the ‘cultural programmes’, as Shmuel Eisenstadt puts it. To assume, however, that contemporary, say, Japanese modernity is determined by the long-term cultural legacy of Japanese society underestimates the dynamism of modernity that has often been observed. The commitment to autonomy renders the acceptance of any prior answers difficult and contestable. Rejecting any cultural determinism of ‘multiple modernities’, however, does not suggest, in turn, that answers to the questions are under constant revision. Modernity is not a permanent revolution either. Rather, the answers that any given collectivity of human beings – for the sake of brevity, any given society – elaborates to these questions can be traced back to significant moments of their common history.

The experience of significant historical moments constitutes the background against which specific answers to those questions are elaborated: this proposition takes up the common view that modernity emerged historically as a profound rupture with the past, as a rupture with ‘tradition’ as the common sociological parlance has it. From a modernist perspective, the significant historical moments that put modernity firmly into place were a particular sequence of great revolutions: the scientific revolution, the industrial revolution, and the democratic revolution. After those revolutions, this view holds, the adequate answers to the three fundamental questions were found once and for all. From then on, modern society is said to have unfolded rather smoothly and progressively, and all remaining difference between societies is seen as due to either ‘backwardness’ or relatively insignificant cultural difference. The significance of these moments in the history of European modernity will not be doubted here – against objections from some forms of post-colonial studies, which tend to see Eurocentrism wherever European history is studied, and of more recent historiography, in which the idea of major social transformations dissolves into myriads of small occurrences that do not add up to anything significant.
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The interpretation given collectively to the experiences of those significant moments is that which gives shape to a specific variety of modernity: experiences, namely, do not ‘speak’ on their own – they need to be interpreted and given meaning in human interaction. While the approach I propose here agrees with established wisdom about modernity in regarding those revolutionary transformations as highly significant moments in European – and to some extent North American – history, it takes issue with the view that such a rupture occurred once and for all, and that the evolutionary programme of modernity just unfolds from that moment onwards. In contrast, I suggest that the experience of those moments differed considerably between societies and that the interpretations given to them were contested from the beginning and continued being revised in light of further experiences with their consequences. As Hamm in Endgame has it, there is some end in the beginning. But how to go on is not endlessly determined by the beginning.

The objective of this book is to spell out the above programme. In this light, the remainder of this chapter will do the following. First, it will review the variety of existing approaches to the study of modernity in some more detail. The aim here is to demonstrate that an analysis of modernity in terms of experience and interpretation does exist already but that it has not been elaborated in any systematic way. Second, to provide the underpinnings of a more systematic elaboration, it will discuss the status of the three questions raised above for a historico-sociological analysis of social configurations. For these purposes, the questions are rephrased as problématiques to which any society needs to give an answer. The question about the rules for life in common constitutes the political problématique (to be analysed in Part I of this volume); the one about the satisfaction of needs, the economic problématique (Part II); and the one about valid knowledge, the epistemic problématique (Part III). The book will proceed by demonstrating how different answers were given ‘within modernity’ to these problématiques.

The meaning of ‘within modernity’ requires a clarification to avoid misunderstandings. It here refers to the predominant presence of the idea of autonomy in the social configurations that are analysed. Wherever human beings hold an understanding of themselves as autonomous beings, there is ‘modernity’ – the ancient Greek democracies, for example, were highly modern in many respects. The analysis of modernity as the experience with, and interpretation of, human beings giving themselves their own laws entails a broadening of the concept of modernity and allows a widening of the spatio-temporal perspective for the socio-historical investigation of modern practices.
At the same time, though, the term ‘modernity’ cannot escape reference to the all-too-widely accepted idea that modern societies are those that have evolved in Western Europe and North America during the past two centuries. Working by means of conceptual retrieval and aiming at a review of historical experiences, much of my own analysis draws on such existing scholarship and will often refer to Western Europe and North America for examples and illustrations. However, my analysis in terms of problématiques takes distance from any conceptualization that presupposes a tight link between the concept of modernity and recent Western history. This double orientation may appear as ridden with contradictions, most clearly of a strong tension between a very broad and general concept, on the one hand, and the need to be specific, on the other, as experiences and their interpretations are, first of all, local and particular. While I acknowledge this tension, I rather see it as both inescapable and capable of fruitfully widening the scope of the analysis.

To underline the specificity of experiences and their interpretations, the general analysis of the three problématiques in terms of modernity will be followed (in Part IV) by reflections on the specificity of European modernity – as an example of modern experiences and their interpretations, not as the origin of modernity or its model. The choice of Europe as a ‘case’ is doubly motivated. First, the author of this book is European, and the book is, therefore, also a reflection on his own experience with the recent transformations of European modernity. Second, European modernity – as any other – is today more than ever set in the context of a global socio-political constellation. One of the tasks of Part IV is to see in what way the European interpretations of modernity can contribute to addressing the novel problems emerging in this constellation, which is more suitably described as one of dispute over ways of world-making than as one of one-dimensional and inescapable tendencies of globalization (see Karagiannis and Wagner 2007).

**Modernity: beyond institutional analysis**

As briefly introduced above, 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
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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, in this view, 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 idea 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 Max 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 1976 [1904–5/20], p. 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. This view has been radically challenged by work in philosophy, anthropology and post-colonial studies over the past three decades. 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 post-colonial 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 coevalness’ (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. This book should be seen as a contribution towards a rethinking of the concept ‘modernity’ in the light of such conceptual retrieval.

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 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 2001a). 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 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, sociopolitical 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 mentioned before, as the scientific, industrial, and democratic revolutions – 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 USA 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 1940s. 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 analysed 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 it was, 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 (for a detailed discussion of such critique of modernity, see chapter 5).
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 1990a; Arnason 1989; Wagner 1994). By this term, Castoriadis refers to something similar to, in more conventional terminology, 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 interpretative 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. 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 life in common, or the political problématique, which was expressed in the concept ‘society’ (see, e.g., Smelser 1997, chapter 3). When assuming, however, that a modern set of institutions can be straightforwardly 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 (see also Skirbekk 1993).
A fourth conceptualization of modernity brought even more strongly 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. 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, p. 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 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 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, p. 46). This view is opposed to the one that sees modernity as an epoch and a set of institutions, which demand obedience to agreed-upon rules.

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, 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 the institutional and the critical 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 three decades 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 self-understandings of modernity. The conception of *modernity as an ethos and as an experience* has underlined the normative and agential features of modernity. In the sense of ethos, it emphasizes the lack of any given foundations and the possibility of pushing the ‘project of modernity’ ever further. In the sense of experience, it accentuates creativity and openness.

**Multiple modernities: multiples of what?**

We cannot entirely do without the institutional and the critical approaches. But the potential to further develop the thinking about modernity and overcome its impasses lies today with the interpretative and the experiential ones. While the interpretative 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 recent years, research on ‘multiple modernities’ has aimed at analysing the plurality of interpretations of the modern signification (Eisenstadt 1998). Despite all its accomplishments, however, this perspective risks merely multiplying 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, p. 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’ (Latour 2000, p. 259).

This conceptual move has two major consequences. First, it loosens the grip on the ‘unit of analysis’. We can no longer assume that there is something like Japanese or French or European modernity, because we need to establish first whether and how far Japan or France or Europe have indeed constituted a common space of experience giving the background to a specific and unique interpretation of modernity. Second, it demands a specification of a situation that can be analysed as ‘modern’. Above, I have already introduced the idea of autonomy – and its correlate, mastery – as that which constitutes a modern self-understanding. And I have added that this self-understanding recasts the fundamental *problématiques* of human social life, such as the search for rules for life in common, for valid knowledge, and the aim to satisfy one’s needs. These *problématiques* – the political, epistemic
and economic ones – are not specific to modernity as such; they traverse all human societies. But the view that solutions to them are not given but need to be sought is that which the modern commitment to autonomy, the modern way of confronting these problématiques, entails.

The epistemic and the political problématiques have often been regarded as closely related to one another. If modernity entails that human beings find their own solutions to them, that is, that they give themselves their own laws (autonomy), the beginning of philosophy as the human questioning of being coincides with the beginning of politics as the giving of laws for living together – historically in ancient Greece (see, e.g., Castoriadis 1986, pp. 282–6). The relation between these two problématiques defines much of the history of political philosophy. Citizens of a free polity acting autonomously expose themselves, by virtue of their commitment to autonomy, to high uncertainty. Devising strategies for dealing with such uncertainty, they – or their political philosophers – tend to strengthen the idea of, and the commitment to, instrumental mastery of the world and of themselves. As a consequence, though, certain forms of autonomy may be constrained or ruled out with a view to enhancing mastery and, thus, predictability. This consideration provides the background for one of the persistent tensions within the modern imaginary signification. In the history of philosophy, this question emerges time and again, such as in Plato, with his need for excluding the poets from the polis, and in Kant, who counterbalanced his commitment to freedom by tying the exercise of freedom to the use of reason or, in other words, by subjecting the political problématique to the epistemic one. In the following analysis, this particular conflation will be avoided by discussing the political problématique separately from, and prior to, the epistemic one (in Parts I and III). Thus, the ways of dealing with the political problématique will not be subordinated to any solutions found in treating the epistemic problématique.

In some also time-honoured but much more recent ways of thinking, a third problématique has been linked to these two classical ones: the problématique of organizing for the satisfaction of needs, or the economic problématique (discussed in Part II). This third problématique, not unknown to the ancients, did not occupy any important place in scholarly thought before early modern times because it was considered to be a private matter that had to be left within the confines of the household. Its elevation to a more prominent position occurred in basically two steps. A fundamentally Aristotelian political ontology being left intact, the size of households tended to grow over
time, until in feudalism entire principalities could be seen as single households. With mercantilism and absolutism, the polity itself was regarded as a giant household, and ‘economic’ thinking thus tended to merge with ‘political’ thinking in the form, for instance, of the policy and cameral sciences (see, e.g., Maier 1980). If this was the first step in the emancipation of the third problématique from its inferior status, the second step came with political economy and the idea that the satisfaction of needs could be treated, quite like the questions of knowledge and polity, in a ‘modern’ manner, namely by allowing human beings to find their own ways of dealing with it, autonomously, by giving themselves their own laws of economic action and interaction.

This elevation of the third problématique is one of the interpretative sources of the rise of capitalism (to be discussed in chapter 6). Appropriately so, Marx’s analysis of capitalism proceeded as, in the first instance, a ‘critique of political economy’. However, his approach tacitly assumed that answers to the other two problématiques were rather unquestionably available – in principle, although not necessarily in historical actuality – as means to effectively criticize this third one. Thus, the critique of political economy proceeded by means of ‘denunciation’ (Luc Boltanski) or ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Paul Ricoeur) without questioning its own validity claims (see the discussion in chapter 5). And the political was conceptualized in such a way that it could unproblematically be appropriated by an emerging collective subject, once the conditions had matured. In the view that I develop here, in contrast, the rise of political economy will be considered, first of all, in terms of bringing about a change in the relation between the three problématiques and, that is, as affecting all three problématiques at their conceptual core, not merely the emerging one.6

Overview

Once the overall configuration of such social philosophy of problématiques is grasped, the ground is prepared for re-analysing the tradition of political economy, and later disciplinary economics and rational choice theory, both in terms of their possible ‘modernity’ and in view of developing a viable form of critique. This is, in particular, the task of the second part of this book, devoted to a historico-sociological analysis of the experiences of changes in the ways of dealing with the economic problématique. It will be preceded, in Part I, by a similar analysis of the political problématique, its trans-
formations in the light of interpretations of prior experiences, and succeeded, in Part III, by an analysis focusing on the epistemic problématique. As mentioned above, the main reason for separating the analysis of these three problématiques is to avoid the conflation of issues, an all-too-common phenomenon in the history of social and political thought.

Furthermore, though, there is also a rationale for the particular order of analysis. When conflation occurred, it most often entailed the subordination of the political problématique to either the epistemic problématique, as said above, or to the economic problématique or even to both. The argument then is that either the political form of modernity can be derived from valid knowledge about the world or that there is only a limited set of modern political forms that is compatible with ‘economic modernity’, that is with ‘market society’ or with ‘capitalism’. Analysing the political problématique here first, in contrast, makes this particular kind of conflation and subordination impossible. The following analysis will withhold arguments about the economic and epistemic problématique until a later point to restore a proper sense of autonomy to the ways of dealing with the political problématique. After all, the ‘invention of the political’ (paraphrasing Christian Meier and Cornelius Castoriadis) in ancient Greece entailed a strong sense of collective self-determination, of the actual capacity of a society to act upon itself and to elaborate an explicit and specific self-understanding.

In turn, this move will allow an analysis of the economic problématique in the light of the challenge its rise posed to the established ways of thinking about the political problématique. Thus, both the argument about the functional superiority of ‘free markets’ and the one about the role of the state as the ‘executive committee of the bourgeoisie’ will be rejected as theoretical ‘solutions’ to the relation between the political and the economic problématiques.

Rather, the focus will be – across all three analyses – on the variety of interpretations that have been given to these problématiques and their relation in the light of specific experiences made. Finally, moving the discussion of the epistemic problématique into the third position allows me to make visible how proposed solutions to epistemic questions need to be understood in the context of problematic situations that were often created by particular experiences with political and economic issues. The aim is not, in inversion of known reasoning, to argue for the subordination of the epistemic problématique to either the political or the economic one or both. Rather, various claims to context-independent knowledge will be analysed as involving the creation and transformation of interpretative resources to situate
human beings in the world. Such a contextualization does not render these claims invalid per se; it should be seen as a step towards grasping the reach of the claims and to open them up to contestation, as any truly modern understanding of knowledge would require.

Part I starts out by discussing how the modern commitment to autonomy – or freedom – was recast in the light of experiences with varieties of collectivism, including totalitarianism, in such a way that the concern with individual liberty became unduly prominent (chapter 2). Subsequently, it is argued that a comprehensive interpretation of political modernity will need to devise a balance between the commitments to individual and to collective self-determination. No emphasis on individual freedom, as understandable as it may be, can make the question of collective autonomy disappear, as a historico-sociological overview of modernity’s changing political forms will show (chapter 3). Finally, the experience of ‘1968’ and its aftermath is analysed in terms of shifting balances between individual and collective autonomy (chapter 4). This particular event is chosen because it marks one of the moments of transition from the heyday of ‘modern society’ to the recent concern with making ‘modernity’ intelligible.

Part II moves towards interpretations of economic modernity by first discussing the contribution of critical theory to the analysis of capitalism and market society (chapter 5). It is argued that critical theory keeps crucial insights about the workings of economic modernity alive but that it also persistently underestimates the role of democracy in capitalism. That is why the following chapter shifts towards a discussion of the relation between the economic and the political problématiques (chapter 6). As in Part I, a final chapter is devoted to the analysis of the most recent reinterpretation of modernity, in this case the exit from organized capitalism in the recent emphasis on ‘flexibility’ of economic organization (chapter 7). Part III discusses the epistemic claims of modernity under two headings. First, a brief sketch of debates on science from the ‘scientific revolution’ to the ‘science wars’ is provided in terms of the variety of interpretations the epistemic claim of modernity has undergone (chapter 8). Second, the particular claim of the social sciences is investigated in terms of the varieties of interpretations of socio-political modernity that those sciences have provided (chapter 9).

Throughout, European examples are at the centre of the analysis, but Part IV moves explicitly to a focus on the European experiences of modernity and their interpretations. First (in chapter 10), a long-term perspective on the dynamics of European history, from the religious wars to the building of welfare states, is developed that links directly to the analysis of the forms of political modernity provided
in chapter 3. These observations are complemented by a view on the transformations of the self-understanding of European modernity during the twentieth century, which in their sum lead to a relativizing of the view of Europe as the avant-garde of modernity, in particular in the light of experiences such as colonialism, world wars and totalitarianism. Subsequently, the current attempt at consolidating a specific European interpretation of modernity in the contemporary global context is discussed, with particular emphasis on the comparison with the other main ‘Western’ interpretation of modernity, the one of the USA (chapter 11).

Part V can be considered as a methodological and conceptual appendix to the preceding analysis. Preconditions for, and implications of, the approach within the wider debates in the social sciences will be discussed here from two angles. First, a proposal is made to reconnect the social theory of modernity to the political philosophy of modernity, two genres of intellectual work that are practised in almost perfect separation today (chapter 12). Second, with the proposed focus on experiences and interpretations, the approach needs to be constitutively historical. Thus, its social theory component needs to draw on historical sociology, and its political philosophy component needs to be based on the critical history of political concepts (chapter 13).