

# Modes of narrating modernity

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### THE MODERN RUPTURE

For several decades, the term 'modern society' has rather unquestioningly been applied to the social formations of the Northwestern quarter of the world during the past few centuries. It relies on a basic distinction between these social formations and 'traditional' societies.<sup>1</sup> However, it has been immensely difficult to both exactly define the characteristics of modern societies and to show when they actually broke with traditional social formations.

Often, processes of urbanization, industrialization, democratization, the emergence of an empirical-analytical approach to knowledge are referred to.<sup>2</sup> All of these processes, however, extend over long periods of time, they do not always occur simultaneously, and some of them can be traced to regions and times quite distant from the so-called modern world and era. More specifically then, the so-called industrial and democratic revolutions are sometimes seen as the social phenomena constituting modernity.<sup>3</sup>

Even these revolutions are fairly extended and uneven phenomena in time and space. But if one starts with the political changes in seventeenth-century England and the economic transformations in the late eighteenth century, some demarcation is achieved. Furthermore, it can be argued that these developments had impacts, even if only gradually, on the rest of the world by changing the general conditions for phrasing political ideas and organizing economic practices. The close coincidence of the American and French Revolutions then seemed to provide a sufficiently short period that could be seen as the beginning of political modernity.<sup>4</sup> During the nineteenth century, periods of industrial take-off in a number of European countries and in the US have come to be seen as marking a similar economic rupture.<sup>5</sup>

To many observers, these transformations lay so far apart and were so little connected that serious doubts could be raised on whether they constituted a major social transition. Social historical and anthropological research, in particular, could show that very little had changed in the orientations and practices of most human beings during and after these supposedly revolutionary events. If modernity was to mark a 'condition' or an 'experience',<sup>6</sup> then the qualifications required to show

its existence were largely absent in the allegedly modern societies during the nineteenth century, and for a still fairly large number of people during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Some recent research, though, has re-emphasized the idea of the modern rupture, and a critical look at this research may help to clarify the issue. Michel Foucault sees the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a period in which new discursive formations emerged in the humanities, namely the tripartite set of discourses of biology, political economy and linguistics. From a perspective of the history of concepts, Reinhart Koselleck speaks of a major turn in the development of key philosophical and political ideas. Partly following Koselleck, Jürgen Habermas identifies the emergence of a self-reflective philosophy of modernity and the opening of the time horizon. The beginning of a social time of history marks the possibility of a view of history as a project. Inversely, Wolf Lepenies identifies the end of natural history. These analyses would indeed locate the beginning of modernity at the turn to the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

I generally concur with this perspective, but one of its features needs to be emphasized. Broadly understood, all of these works are contributions to a history of concepts and of philosophy. Hardly any similarly clear ruptures occurred in terms of economic, social and political practices throughout society.<sup>9</sup> In such terms, the prevailing view seems to be that the revolutions were much less revolutionary, that is, pronounced ruptures during a short time-span, than the discourses about the revolutions. In as much as the studies by Foucault, Koselleck and others are about practices, they are about those of the very small minorities in a given society who were directly involved in the production of these discourses, namely about (proto-) intellectuals and (proto-) professionals.<sup>10</sup>

If these findings are reliable, one can understand the difficult relation between the judgement and the analysis of modernity, which haunts our thinking, in sociohistorical terms. It is the relation of affinity, but non-identity between ideas and institutions of modernity that is at the root of most of the problems in analysing the history of modernity.<sup>11</sup> The normative issue, that is, the *project* of modernity, may then possibly be more or less neatly identified historically and theoretically, even with all its internal tensions. However, this project has never translated into similarly neat and pure institutions.

To pursue an analysis of modernity, then, requires a distinction between the discourse on the modern project (itself ambiguous and amenable to a sociology of knowledge as well as subject to historical transformations), and the practices and institutions of modern society. Far from trying to erect some idealistic—normative and suprahistorical—notion of modernity, this merely acknowledges, *sociologically and historically*, that some break in the discourses on human beings and society occurred more than two centuries ago. This discursive rupture brought about the establishment of the modern ideas as new imaginary significations for both individuals and society and, as such, it instituted new kinds of social and political issues and conflicts.<sup>12</sup>

## TWO PORTRAITS OF MODERNITY

The discourse of modernity is based most firmly on the idea of freedom and autonomy. Historically, it was used to interpret and reinterpret observable social practices in the light of this imaginary signification. By way of an introduction, I shall briefly sketch the main cognitive opposition that emerged in this process, the opposition between the realization of liberty and the undermining of liberty. Thus, two very common, but incompatible, portraits of modernity will appear. These are two opposed narratives, one of which may be called the discourse of liberation, the other the discourse of disciplinization. This sketch does not aspire to intellectual historiography, rather it is meant to generate the issues that a sociology of modernity will have to pay attention to.

The *discourse of liberation* stood at the very origins of modern times.<sup>13</sup> It goes back to the quest for autonomy for scientific pursuits during the so-called scientific revolution, to the demand for self-determination in the political revolutions—the model cases of which were the American and French ones—and to the liberation of economic activities from the supervision and regulation of an absolutist state.

In each of these cases freedom was seen as a basic—‘unalienable’, ‘self-evident’—human right. But it was also argued for with the collective outcome of liberations in mind, namely the enhancement of the striving for truth, the building of a polity to whose rules everybody had contributed and in which, thus, violence was no longer a legitimate means of action, and the increase of ‘the wealth of nations’. In both ways—the establishment of individual rights and the collective justification for the use of these rights—the discourse of liberation was and is of major importance as a means of self-interpretation of and for ‘modern’ societies.

Throughout the past two centuries, however, the adequacy of this discourse has not remained unquestioned. It had not only an intellectual genealogy, but also a particular social location. It was pursued only by some groups, and it was socially conditioned. An early critique focused on the contrast between the discourse and the practices of the social groups that were supporting it.

A particularly strong version of such a ‘critique of ideology’ was launched by Karl Marx. He held that the allegedly universalist and scientific theories of political economy merely masked the interests of the emerging bourgeoisie. Rather than discarding them completely, however, he tried to separate their real insights into the workings of the economy from their ideological elements. Thus, he indeed subscribed to a notion of the need for liberating the productive forces; it was rather the social context in which such a project was to be carried out that had to be revolutionized so that all humankind could benefit from this liberation.

Quite regardless of whether one concurs with Marx’s particular analysis, nineteenth-century European societies displayed, to almost any observer, striking contradictions between a universalist rhetoric and the strong boundaries between social groups as to the availability of liberties. The opportunities of entrepreneurship, of expressing one’s views and interests within political

institutions, of participating in the academic search for truth, were limited to a very small part of the population and the barriers erected were often formal (like the restriction of the suffrage), or at least formidable. In fact, the idea of *containing the liberal utopia* within certain limits, of creating boundaries against the consequences of its own claims is crucial to any understanding of modernity, as shall be shown throughout this book.

Still, from a twentieth-century perspective, it may appear as if the power of the idea of liberty ultimately overcame these boundaries. Not only were formal rules of exclusion lifted, but social mobility also increased. Related to such social transformations, the discourse of liberation itself changed its form. The functionality of social arrangements in 'modern' society was itself regarded as liberating human beings. The higher performance of economy, politics and science would set the individual free from many of the concerns of 'traditional' societies. It was recognized that the new arrangements also put new strains on the individuals who would have to comply with multiple role expectations according to their status in different spheres of society. But in many of the analyses put forward during the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, the gains in terms of liberty were seen as far superior to the losses.

The most sophisticated, and far from uncritical, version of such a discourse is put forward by Jürgen Habermas. While praising the performance of modern institutions and accepting their historical inevitability, he fully recognizes their liberty-constraining effects. He reconciles this ambiguous finding with the attempt to safeguard the 'project of modernity' by counterposing those institutions against a 'life-world' in which authentic, unmediated communication is possible and from which renewals of an emphatic understanding of modernity may always reemerge.<sup>14</sup>

During the past two decades, such views of a functionally ordered society, be they generally affirmative or critical, have lost their persuasive power. From within this intellectual tradition some observers saw a gradual dissolution of the order; moreover, empirical findings on pluralization and disintegration of both institutional arrangements and social life-styles were reported, which were difficult to accommodate in mere terms of functionality. In this current phase, the emphasis on order is relaxed, and the discourse of liberation takes the form of a praise of individualization.

Ultimately, then, modernity is about the increase of individualism and individuality. In an early phase, few may have benefited at the expense of many. In a second era, differentiation may have occurred group- and role-wise, but not really on the level of the individual. Nowadays, however, modernity's achievements allow the development of a great plurality and variety of individual life-styles and life-projects, available to the great majority of the population of Western societies.

If such a discourse of liberation, all modifications notwithstanding, shows a continuity through more than two centuries of modernity, it is plausible to assume that it reflects important features of these societies. However, it has never been without a critical counterpart, the *discourse of disciplinization*.



A starting-point for the latter was the observation that liberation actually never occurred the way it was conceived in the liberal ideas. European revolutionary societies between 1750 and 1850 were marked by continuities, and the most important continuity was the centrality of the state apparatus. If we look at the Enlightenment writings, we shall see that the state, while feudal and absolutist in historical origins, was often regarded as the means to make Enlightenment social practices possible. One major argument focused on the necessity of the state for social order, another saw in the state a social incarnation of Reason, raised as a universal entity above the particularistic society.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, its nature as an effective and legitimate boundary to the potential infinity of possible autonomous social practices becomes evident. The state form as the container—safeguard and limit—of modernity is another major issue throughout this book.

The idea of the state as container of modernity, as an instrument to restrict practices and to discipline individuals, drew on an existing social institution. A second, and historically later, variant of the theory of disciplinization postulated the unintended self-limitation of modernity as the outcome of modern practices. Far from fulfilling the bourgeois-humanist promise of human self-realization through autonomy, so the argument goes, modern practices, once started, would transform human beings in both idea and reality so that the very notion of realizing a self becomes untenable.

Elements of such a discourse can be found in Marx's writings about alienation and fetishization as a result of the exposure of human beings to the market. Analogously, Weber argues that the achievements of the workings of bureaucratic and market rationalities transform the 'life destiny' of human beings and rob human life of some of its important qualities. Modern scientific practices, even if they were begun in its name, would turn out to be unable to maintain the quest for truth. And according to Nietzsche, the moral-religious project of a Christianity that was focused on the individual undermined its own foundations and cancelled any possibility of morality from social life. The argumentative figure of the self-cancellation of modernity in and through its own practices is a further theme that needs to be explored in this socio-historical account of modernity.

Such portraits were drawn from the experience of a modernity that had begun to unfold its full powers, powers that were seen as residing in the multitude of morally, economically, politically and intellectually freed individuals. While the societal effects of the interactions of these individuals were the problem at the heart of these analyses, the dynamic itself was seen as being unleashed by the freeing of the individuals.

The experience of twentieth-century modernity tended to alter the portrait of disciplinization again, with Weber already marking a different tone. However, a full new narrative of modernity, focusing on the subjection and disciplinization of individuals, only came into being with fascism, the Second World War and the massive material transformations of the modern society scape between the 1930s and the 1960s. Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse as well as Michel Foucault identified a disciplining alliance of instrumental reason and

will to power in the organized, administered societies of that time. Under the almighty coalition of knowledge and power, the question of resistance or compliance hardly seemed to pose itself any longer.

With plurality and difference apparently reemerging during the past two decades, images of instrumentality and one-dimensionality have lost their appeal. Still, the discourse of disciplinization has not given way to a new and unquestioned hegemony of the discourse of liberation. At least one strand of the postmodernist debate interprets pluralization not as a condition of the self-realization of the individual but as the expression of a fragmentation of selfhood, and sees the subject finally completely vanishing, disappearing even from the utopian point from which claims for societal alternatives could be made. Such kinds of arguments point to the possibility of a *historical transformation of the self* and to the conditions for, and understanding of, self-realization.

These two portraits of modernity were always in co-existence and, as I have tried to indicate, they even underwent analogous transformations over time. They were not always as completely separate as I described them. The most sensitive observers of modernity, such as Marx and Weber, contributed to both images. However, the gallery of modernity is full of pictures that emphasize either one or the other side. What we may conclude from this is, first, that the authors have indeed caught some relevant and crucial aspects of modern times. It is unlikely that they have all failed to see clearly. Apparently liberty and discipline are key features of modernity. The real task though seems to be to paint, so to speak, both sides of modernity simultaneously, to conclude on an irreducibly double nature of modernity. A more adequate portrait, then, would have to merge the two existing perspectives into one which maintains the ambiguity.

## AMBIGUITIES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

We shall reconsider the Enlightenment and, with it, the modern project, as being haunted by a fundamental ambiguity. There is a number of ways of formulating this ambiguity. One side is fairly clear—there is the idea of self-rule, the rejection of any external, superior being or principle that could impose maxims for action. This is the very foundation of liberty as autonomy. By its very nature, it is without limits and boundaries. A radically modern conception allows no actor or instance to provide criteria or rules for setting boundaries to self-determination.

On the other side, most social philosophies in the realm of modernity do not rely exclusively on such a conception. The discourses of modernity reject the *imposition* of a substantive notion of good and right, as ordained by a God, but many of them accept the idea of the *recognition* of worldly values and rules, existing before and beyond the individual, to be discovered, known and followed by human beings. There are varieties of such conceptions, which I will not discuss in detail here.<sup>16</sup> Just three different basic ideas shall be mentioned, which can be found in various combinations. First, there is the idea of human nature as an anthropological frame for liberty. It may not only involve the concept of natural, unalienable rights



of the individual, but also views on natural social orders, such as, for instance, the family and the public representation of the family by the man as head of the household. Second, there is the idea of reason. Reason was seen as some supra-individual and, maybe, supra-human category that, while it could be specified in different ways, would be invoked as a reference-point to which the strivings of free individuals would lead. Third, the idea of the need to consider the common good, beyond the right to individual autonomy, was a collectivist notion which could not be unequivocally derived from individual wills. The idea of the common good relates to the question of the foundation of the polity on liberal principles. It entails a distinction, in Isaiah Berlin's famous terms, of negative and positive liberty, liberty from constraints and liberty to achieve substantive goals, together with others, in community.<sup>17</sup> In different ways, all of these concepts (re-)introduced some 'other' criterion that could potentially be in conflict with the volition of individual, living human beings.

Two questions are important in this context. First, (a) how is the potential conflict between the two basic criteria of modernity handled? And second, (b) how is the 'other side' to the criterion of individual autonomy exactly determined?<sup>18</sup>

(a) The potential conflict between two criteria, if they were independent of each other, was well recognized. The most intriguing solution to the problem of the modern double-sidedness was the identification of the two sides. Free and knowledgeable subjects would strive towards the realization of their nature, of reason, and of common well-being. This Enlightenment faith, however, was soon shaken—though it still lives on, for instance, in the claim, upheld in neoclassical economics, that an economic order with a multitude of independent actors would regulate itself toward achieving a stable optimum position.

A way of upholding the optimistic proposition while taking real-world deviations into account was to argue that the individuals were not as free and knowledgeable as they were supposed to be. Education and/or exclusion were to be the means of dealing with the problems they posed. Such a view presupposes that some know better than others what is natural, reasonable or good. They may lead others towards this insight, but until that stage is reached, it is only they who have full membership rights to modernity.<sup>19</sup>

Put in these terms, we may distinguish two co-existing, though conflicting strands of Enlightenment thought, the regulating one and the self-guiding one.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that the strengthening of one strand at the expense of the other, while dealing with some problems, tends to suppress or neglect basic features of modernity. The regulating strand suppresses the right to individual autonomy of those who are classified as unfit for modernity. The self-guiding strand, while underlining the idea of individual autonomy, neglects the questions of what the substantive aspects of human life are and how they can be identified and approached.<sup>21</sup> It is to this issue that I now turn.

(b) The idea of autonomy seems fairly unproblematic as long as we take it to refer to a single individual. Modernity, then, is about the possibility (opportunity and capability) of an individual subject's self-realization. Now, hardly anybody

is ready to argue—though a few are—that it could make sense to speak of individual self-realization without any reference to a substantive goal and to social relations to other human beings. If asked about their understanding of a good life, most people would either give answers that refer to others directly or indicate objectives that need to be socially conceived. References to social *substance* and to *collectivity*, that is, to the fact that some values may be upheld only by collective arrangement, enter into the modern condition. They do so obviously empirically, and it can also be argued that they are inevitable in terms of principles of justification. From the point onwards that individual autonomy and liberty were thought of, their various complements co-existed with them. Both substance and collectivity set boundaries to the practice of individual autonomy. The ideas of individual autonomy and liberty neither could nor did exist intellectually or socially unbound. Controversies are rather about how substance and collectivity are determined. To advance the argument, I shall introduce a very crude distinction at this point.<sup>22</sup>

*Early* modernists argue that there are some cultural ascriptions that precede any practice of individual autonomy, both in terms of substance and of collectivity. Human beings, for instance, are born into a cultural-linguistic formation which gives form and sets boundaries to individual strivings. However an individual may define herself, she will draw on these forms and will relate to the community inside the boundaries as well as contribute to the historical path of this collective. Of course, this is the reasoning that stands behind the idea of the nation-state as the modern polity, and I shall discuss its relevance to the history of modernity later (see Chapter 3).

*Classical* modernists tend to turn from those substantive foundations to more procedural ones.<sup>23</sup> They put forward the idea of various separate conceptualizations of basic spheres of society, as realms of economics, politics, science and culture. The construction of these spheres and their relations to each other as a new kind of naturally interlocking order is largely the result of attempts to link individual autonomy to social outcomes. The power of the revolutions of modernity—the scientific, industrial and bourgeois ones—resided not least in the establishment of such new sets of assumptions about the conditions for the beneficial cohabitation of human beings. In all of these conceptualizations, the complement to the idea of individual autonomy is one of rationality, actually of specific rationalities in each realm. Then the argument is developed that human beings as rational agents will follow these rationalities, if they are free to do so. If everyone does so, then the interaction of all human beings will both advance their individual objectives and be of benefit to all. Thus, a means of reconciliation of the duality of individual autonomy and its ‘other’ has been provided.<sup>24</sup> Far from actually identifying and describing real social practices, these conceptualizations remained largely fictitious. Rather than reality, they described the ‘project of modernity’. Knowing well that they were a fiction, the modernizers’ optimistic assumption was that they would realize themselves once the appropriate social conditions were created.



*Late* modernists dwell on this fictitious character of the conceptual order of high modernism. They argue that even the idea of procedural rationalities makes too many assumptions and cannot be upheld for any general analysis, or as a basis for politics. In their view, everything—language, self and community, to use Richard Rorty's terms<sup>25</sup>—is contingent. I do not want to discuss here such anti-foundationalism in philosophical terms, but I want to point to some political implications (on sociological implications see Chapter 9).

Politically, anti-foundationalism opens the way for a critical analysis of the modernist ideology. At the same time, it is a strong assertion of the idea of individual autonomy, since, in a contingent world, every individual decides for herself who she wants to be and to which collective she wants to belong. In terms of political theory, it is a call for a radical liberalism, based on what we may call an individualistic political ontology. Indeed, we may accept as a historical fact that the transformation of the modern ideas into social practices occurred—and, as a complete set, possibly could only occur—in the guise of liberalism. 'Actually existing liberalisms', though, often included substantivistic and collectivistic theories—such as, most prominently, in the fusion of liberalism and nationalism in the nineteenth century.

Still, the organization of allocative and authoritative practices relied heavily on the idea of an autonomous individual, capable of goal-directed action, as the basic unit of social organization—as is most evident in the rules of law and political participation. Law is the institution *par excellence* that creates, in the view of the relevant others, autonomous individuals responsible for their actions. If this is the case, then a sort of imbalance is inscribed in the modern ambiguity, a shift towards individual autonomy. In rights-based liberalism, however incomplete, the individual is the only category that need not, often in fact, cannot, be debated. The individual is simply there, whereas what human nature is or how the collective good should be determined needs to be argued about. Substantive aspects of human interaction are subject to communication and consensus. And, to make the issue even more complicated, with whom one should enter into communication (that is, the boundaries of the community) is itself not given, but subject to agreement.

At this stage of the argument, I only want to take note of two very general points. First, this bias that is inscribed into the modern ambiguity may well allow for a gradual shift to a hegemony of individual autonomy, aligned only with a disengaged, instrumental concept of reason, in the historically dominant conceptions of modernity. Second, the shift in conceptions of modernity—from 'early' to 'classical' to 'late', though it is not linear and far from unequivocal—may be a first indicator of historical processes of de-substantivization and decollectivization of the foundations of modernity.<sup>26</sup> Both points are not conclusions of any sort, but elements of a guiding hypothesis for a historical sociology of modernity.

Such a sociology then needs to search for the boundaries which are *actually* taken for granted in social practices and do in fact limit the range of individual self-rule, and for the kinds of activities which are *actually* considered as within the

realm of possible self-realization. While there is obviously a great range of ways in which individual human beings make use of the available rules and resources for self-realization, there are also distinct historical forms of the construction of social identities. Such questions cannot be posed in purely individualistic terms since the nature of the boundaries depends on how present and relevant others see them. While they are not fixed by any supra-human will, neither can they be created or destroyed by individual will. One needs to transform the issue of contingency into a question for a historical sociology—as an issue of actual, rather than principled contingency.

### **FROM THE PHILOSOPHY TO A HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF MODERNITY**

The ambiguity of modernity takes on varied forms at different times and in different places. Some authors have observed that the double nature of modernity may be due to the specificities of its *intellectual genealogy*, at least in continental Europe. While the main substantive argument was one of commitment to self-rule, it pointed historically towards a rethinking of the prevailing religious notion of the heteronomy of the human condition as being determined by God. To present its argument, Enlightenment thought thus had to link up to the predominant rhetoric form and was phrased as a 'secularized religion' with Reason taking the place of God and History the place of Providence.<sup>27</sup> In tension with the substance of the proposition that should entail an emphasis on openness, liberation, plurality and individuality, the historical form emphasized the advent of a new order that was universal and total and demanded conformity and discipline rather than anything else.

The issue of how to supersede an old order was posed with regard to *social practices* as much as with regard to intellectual modes of reasoning. Again, the conditions of the historical advent of modernity, at least in (continental) Europe, entailed a bias towards an 'organized' or 'imposed' transition rather than an open one in which the outcome would be left to the free workings of a plural society. Pronounced differences in the sociopolitical backgrounds against which the modern project was proposed and developed distinguish the European experience markedly from the North American one. One of the specificities of the French Revolution was that there was a centralized state, endowed with the idea of sovereignty and a bureaucracy to practice it. It seemed quite natural merely to reinterpret this state, then seize it and put it to different uses, if one wanted to transform society. In the absence of such well-established institutions, the situation of the American revolutionaries at the time of their struggle for independence was quite different.

While the main argument of this book is focused on European developments, I shall also repeatedly refer to the North American part of the history of modernity. Apart from helping to understand '*American exceptionalism*', this comparison offers opportunities for a more profound understanding of the dynamics of modernity.

In Europe, the social movements that advanced the 'project of modernity' were well aware of the fact that the liberations they were striving for could not be obtained without conflicting with organized adversaries, not the least of which were the absolutist state and the aristocratic and religious elites of the late feudal period.<sup>28</sup> While they deemed themselves certain of promoting a progress that was inevitable in the long run, they also saw a need to impose it against still-powerful opponents. Among these adversaries were those who faced the threat of losing power, wealth and status. The case against them could easily be argued in terms of modern principles. However, there were also those who would ultimately gain, but who apparently did not yet have insight into the advantages to them. While they could and should be educated, the (temporary) imposition of the reasonable was seen as necessary to avoid risks to liberation. In this respect, the view of some bourgeois revolutionaries on a society, the majority of which was against them, shows analogies to that of Communist revolutionaries in the early Soviet Union and in East European societies after the Second World War.<sup>29</sup>

In the Soviet Union, the issue was phrased as the problem of 'socialism in one country'. This formulation refers very directly to the question of setting boundaries and imposing (a superior) order. Far from presenting a derailment of the modern project or the emergence of some kind of anti-modernity, Soviet socialism emphasizes certain features of modernity, though obviously at the expense of others. Just as American exceptionalism can be regarded as the epitome of one kind of modernity, so should socialism be seen as the epitome of another kind. The *modernity of Soviet socialism*, then, is a second issue for discussion by which I shall compare the West European experience to others, with a view to more firmly grasping the modern ambiguity.

With the help of this *spatial comparison* it is easier to understand why it is so fallacious when major parts of the present debates counterpose a notion of 'postmodernity' to one of modernity. The current distinction of modernity and postmodernity throws light (or casts shadows) on the modern double-sidedness, on the two sides of the modern ambiguity itself. Social phenomena that are labelled postmodern point to one relatively extreme social instantiation of modernity, whereas socialism finds itself close to the other extreme. Both social formations, however, move within the same sociohistorical space, the one created by, as Castoriadis would say, the double imaginary signification of modernity.

The spatial comparison demonstrates that there are varieties of 'actually existing modernities'—with the societies of the United States, Western Europe and the Soviet Union as three major twentieth-century types. It does not yet allow anything to be said about an inherent movement of modernity. On its own, the spatial comparison may, at worst, achieve nothing more than a somewhat more sociologically informed restatement of the dichotomy of liberation and disciplinization. To assess the validity of the hypothesis of de-substantivization and de-collectivization and, eventually, to demonstrate how such processes may come about, the spatial comparison of social formations along the lines of their expression of the modern ambiguity needs to be complemented by a *historical comparison*.



The historical construction of these social formations, as well as their transformations and—partly—demise, may be used to investigate the dynamics inherent to the overall modern project. De-substantivization and de-collectivization of modernity, if they occur, are not self-propelled trends but historical processes, of which there are also partial reversals, created by interacting human beings. For further analysis, the crucial issues are how, when and what kinds of shifts between the foundational imaginary significations occur. All this amounts to a for a historical analysis of the transformations of modernity. Such an analysis will begin with the modern rupture, that is, with the emergence of the master discourse of 'classical' modernity.

Historically, this fiction generated its own problems—problems that we can derive from the master discourse and can use for identifying the analytical issues for a sociology of modernity. As pointed out above, modern reasonings on the constitution of society suffer from the aporia of having to link the normative idea of liberty, as a procedurally *unlimitable* right and obligation to self-rule and self-realization, to a notion of collective good, be it merely in terms of a minimal livable order or be it in terms of substantive objectives of humankind, such as wealth, democracy or truth. Even if one held the idea, as probably some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers did, that a social contract and its rules of implementation could be signed once and for all, the philosophical problematic was troubling enough.

To complicate things, though, each of the reasonings laid foundations for a *historical increase of liberties* and, it seemed, greater substantive achievements if contrasted with the 'pre-modern' regimes. Compared to the late feudal and absolutist regimes with their ascriptive hierarchies and their detailed regulation of all aspects of everyday life, these ideas were no doubt liberating in the sense of setting free a dynamic of human-made change. In their theoretical stringency, they even developed a liberating momentum that has still not exhausted its potential and keeps providing justifications for claims which are valid and unfulfilled today. This is the incomplete character of the project of modernity that Habermas keeps emphasizing.

Here we can also identify the basic tension that characterizes this notion of liberty as part of a socially ambiguous double concept. We may consider 'rational mastery' (Castoriadis) or 'disengaged, instrumental reason' (Taylor) as expressions for the tendency towards an increase of opportunities, an extension of social institutions into time and space, a growth of enablements. This tendency is itself set free by the individual right and obligation to 'autonomy'. In social practice, those liberations tended to alter the kinds of substantive goals human beings were able to accomplish—by extending the reach of human-made institutions. Then, the question of the *collective determination of the substantive objectives of human strivings* (including the question of how far these objectives should in fact be collectively determined), which is an essential element of modernity, became ever more problematic, in at least three respects.

First, the achievable mode of life became a moving target itself. If scientific

activities increased knowledge and economic activities increased wealth, changes in the conditions for collective self-determination would arise that would constantly have to be taken into consideration.<sup>30</sup> The agreement over substantive aspects of modes of social life, which was a formidable problem in the absence of pre-given criteria anyhow, would then be a *continuous* task in *continuously changing* circumstances.

Second, even if liberated scientific and economic practices indeed entailed a rather steady increase of human capabilities, it cannot be taken for granted that enablements would not be, at least temporarily, accompanied by constraints, or that both would be evenly distributed socially, spatially and temporally. From the nineteenth-century 'valley of tears' of 'primitive accumulation' to the twentieth-century concepts of 'deferred gratifications' as well as of 'modernization' and 'development', much of modern socioeconomic debate has centred on this problematic. The more uneven the distribution of enablements and constraints is, the harder one may expect collective self-determination under conditions of comprehensive participation (that is, the full development of political liberty) to be.

Third, beyond more or less directly perceivable, and perhaps even measurable, social distributions of enablements and constraints, the use and diffusion of all kinds of modern achievements will penetrate society and transform all of it to such an extent that certain values and practices will be impossible to uphold. Members of a society could be forced into a situation in which they will have to forfeit crucial identity-constituting practices, elements of their lives that they would not want to trade against anything else.<sup>31</sup> The self-determination of a collective, of whether achievements may be used, becomes fraught with imponderable contradictions and conflicts in such a situation.

The master discourse of liberal modernity denies the fundamental relevance of all of these issues. In its view, the normative potential of revolutionary liberal theorizing resided in a notion of the autonomy of the economic, political, scientific and cultural spheres from each other, and in their capability of self-steering if left to the free interaction of the participating individuals. The differentiation of these spheres, as in functionalist theorizing, is then the guarantor of liberty. For the past two centuries, much of 'modernist' social theory has relied far too much on such assumptions without really scrutinizing them. A redescription of modernity may possibly re-open the debate.

## REPROPOSING A NARRATIVE OF MODERNITY<sup>32</sup>

I began my considerations above with the two concepts of liberation and disciplinization, as they can be found in narratives of modernity. In a second step, I have tried to transform this dichotomy into an ambiguity which is characteristic of modernity. This ambiguity resides in the double imaginary signification of modernity as individual autonomy and its substantive or collective other. I have argued that only a comparative-historical analysis can come closer to understanding

this ambiguity, since there is no general principle combining these significations. The next task, then, is to transfer the concept of a double imaginary signification into the language and tradition of social science.

Whereas modernist social science tends to take the existence of self-regulated sets of institutions, such as the market, the state or scientific institutions, for granted and sees them as supra-human entities having causal effects on individuals, the kinds of institutions and their modes of working both have to be made problematic. I shall base my approach on a concept of 'duality of structure', as cast by Anthony Giddens, which sees institutions as simultaneously enabling and constraining human action, and as being reproduced through human action. A sociohistorical analysis will then have to spell out exactly who and what kind of activity is enabled and who and what is constrained. For this purpose, a distinction between different kinds of social practices shall be introduced (Chapter 2). I shall, for my own objectives, refer to only three kinds of practices: of allocation, of domination, and of signification and symbolic representation. The historical ways of habitualizing such practices and, thereby, extending them over time and space and making them into social institutions, shall be the key object of my analysis of modernity.

The historical analysis itself will start with a brief portrait of early post-revolutionary social configurations, that is, societies in the Europe of the first half of the nineteenth century. In a sense, this era was the heyday of liberal ideology, with the bourgeoisie in the ascendancy to power, as it has often been portrayed. While such a view is not invalid, I shall emphasize that the applicability of ideas of autonomy was effectively contained. With a number of institutional devices, not least the inherited state, boundaries were set to the modern project. This contained form of the bourgeois Utopia, which was far from encompassing all members of a society, shall be labelled *restricted liberal modernity* (Chapter 3).

A certain self-confidence of the bourgeois elites with regard to the feasibility of their project was indeed temporarily achieved. However, from as early as the French Revolution onwards, restrictions could no longer be justified, and were increasingly contested. Also, the dynamics of liberation itself, the extension of mastery of the world and its impact on social orders, tended to upset those same orders. Often, the year 1848 is conveniently marked as the historical point after which major transformations of the restricted liberal social configuration and its self-understanding commenced. By the turn of the century, so many of the boundaries were shaken or even broken; so many people had been, often traumatically, *disembedded* from their social, cultural and economic contexts that one can speak of a *first crisis of modernity*, as a consequence of which societal developments were set on a different path (see Chapter 4).

One effect of the upsetting of social orders during the nineteenth century was that far greater parts of the population of a territory had come under the reach of modern practices. Consequently, they also had to be formally included into modern institutions. Of course, the most important of such social groups were the workers. With hindsight at least, the workers' movement and the formation of trade unions



and labour parties can be seen as a major collective action towards the full inclusion of a hitherto barred part of the population into modern practices and institutions and their achievements. The obvious example is the granting of universal and equal suffrage; however, I also want to refer to participation in such modern practices as consumption of industrial commodities, the shaping of societal self-understandings in cultural production or to the extension of reachable space by means of technologies.

We may speak of this process as an extension of modernity, an increase of the permeation of society by modernity. The process of extension was one of the breaking of boundaries. As such, it was accompanied, at least among the elites, by strong feelings about the lack of both manageability and intelligibility of 'modern society'. This perception is an important background, if not the basis, of the cultural-intellectual crisis of modernity around the turn to the twentieth century. At that time, however, social transformations had already started that were to change the nature of modern institutions along with their expansion. These transformations entailed a *reembedding* of society's individuals into a new order—to be achieved by means of an increasing formalization of practices, their conventionalization and homogenization. As the extension was reached and the social access widened, practices were standardized and new constraints as to the types of permissible activities introduced.

These transformations occurred, *mutatis mutandis*, in all major kinds of social practices. I shall first sketch the practices of allocation, where they included the building of technical-organizational systems that were operated society-wide, as well as the conventionalization of work statuses and the standardization of consumption (Chapter 5). The emergence of the mass party and its restriction to electoral politics channelled the modes of political participation. The extension of policies of social support, later to be known as the welfare state, considerably reduced material uncertainties; at the same time it extended disciplining and homogenizing practices of domination into the realm of family lives (Chapter 6). Under the impetus of establishing cognitive mastery over society, new techniques, classifications and concepts were developed in the social sciences, establishing a new mode of representation of society. One of its features is a tendency to reify major social institutions (Chapter 7).

Taken together, these sets of social practices have almost been all-inclusive with regard to members of a society. However, these practices have been highly organized. Ascriptive roles do not exist under modern conditions, of course. But for a given position in society and a given activity, these practices have prescribed a very limited set of modes of action. I shall propose to describe the social configuration that has been characterized by such practices as *organized modernity*, and the transformations that led to it as a *closure of modernity*. It is the crisis of this organized modernity that postmodernist writings refer to when proclaiming the 'end of modernity'. It seems indeed appropriate to characterize some of the institutional changes in Western societies during the past two decades as a (partial) breakdown of established arrangements and as a re-opening of 'closed' practices.

If and in as far as these changes amount to a major social transformation, though, one should see this as a *second major crisis of modernity*, rather than the end of modernity. It includes strong trends towards de-conventionalization and pluralization of practices, not least the loss of a working understanding of collective agency that once stood behind society wide organized practices (Chapter 8). This loss of collective agency obviously entails a loss of manageability, the disappearance of any actor who is legitimate, powerful and knowledgeable enough to steer interventions into social practices. As such, the disorganization of practices of allocation and domination is directly linked to a 'crisis of representation' of society, in social science as well as in other intellectual practices. Quite a number of the assumptions of modernist social science do not survive this situation unscathed. However, the question of the intelligibility of, at least, parts of the social world remains on the agenda even in an era of 'crisis of representation' and alleged 'end of social science'. The main objective of social science, as I see it, namely to contribute to our own understanding of the social world in which we live, may seem more ambitious than ever, but it is by no means superseded (Chapter 9).

Quite certainly, these crises do not spell the end of modernity as a social configuration. They mark a transition to a new historical era of it. Some intellectual doubts notwithstanding, the double imaginary signification of modernity—autonomy and rational mastery—seems widely untouched and fully intact. An optimistic interpreter of present changes may want to term this new phase *extended liberal modernity*. Under conditions of the full inclusion of all members of society, the organizing and disciplining institutions are dismantled and respective practices relaxed. Difference and plurality, sociality and solidarity could be the key words of the future, as some argue. At the same time, the building of social identities has become a more open and more precarious process, and the erosion of once-reliable boundaries has rephrased the issue of exclusion and inclusion. The decrease of certainties may entail opportunities, but also introduces new constraints and anxieties (Chapter 10).

Thus, I tend to be much more sceptical, in the face of the building of more widely extended institutions (such as global technical and economic arrangements) and of the emergence of new kinds of boundaries inside such a more intensely globalized society. These transformations may entail a new process of social disembedding, of possibly unprecedented dimensions. During the building of the social formation of organized modernity, many violent and oppressive attempts at different kinds of reembedding were started and often violently interrupted. Similar processes may occur again; at the very least, the questions of social identity and political community are badly in need of new answers (Chapter 11).