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Wolfgang Knöbl

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The Sociological Discourse on “Modernization” and “Modernity”

WOLFGANG KNÖBL

In 1947 US-American philosopher and Jewish intellectual Horace M. Kallen published a short booklet with the title “Modernity and Liberty”.¹ Although this text has never become as well-known as other essays of this famous theorist of cultural pluralism, it was a quite remarkable piece nevertheless. Today’s readers and, among them, above all sociologists probably wouldn’t have much difficulties in understanding Kallen’s arguments, even though his position certainly has to be put into the political and social context of the Post-World War II-period in order to fully grasp its meaning. “The world in which we live and move and have our being may be One World. But it is not one modern world. Modernity is a quality and form of human living far more surely than it is a date in history. To identify the modern as merely ‘of the present time’ is to confuse the modern with the contemporaneous. But most of what is contemporary is not modern; a little, a very little, of what is modern can be discerned in the remote past of the historian.”² And Kallen continues in order to define those who could and should legitimately claim themselves as ‘moderns’: “They are the pioneers with whom the rest of the world endeavors to catch up. This minority defines itself not only by its faith in the forms and findings of science, but also by its commitment to three other rules of human association which follow from the scientific outlook and scientific method. The first of these is democracy. The second is industrialism. The third is peace. Science, democracy, industrialism and peace together constitute the differentiae of the modern mind.”³

Nowadays most readers of these sentences probably think that in the late 1940s Kallen’s arguments would have represented a kind of common sense among at least Western intellectuals who presumably already for quite a long time have debated the contours of modernity. But this is a false belief which, in fact, makes Kallen’s piece so remarkable. The truth is that although the

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1. Modernity and Liberty. The University of Buffalo Centenary Lectures on the Problems of Freedom in the Modern World. *The University of Buffalo Studies* 1947, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 73-130.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

concept of “modernity” (“modernité”; “Moderne”) was coined at the end of the 19th century in at least a couple of European languages, scholars within the social sciences and above all the classical founders of sociology (with the partial exception of Georg Simmel) hardly ever used it. Even one of *the* central reference-texts of today’s debate on modernity, Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s “Dialectics of Enlightenment”⁴ which, by coincidence, was published at the same time as Kallen’s piece, made no real use of it. Thus, Kallen was probably one of the first scholars and intellectuals who gave the term “modernity” a prominent position in the analysis of the problems of his time – a couple of years before modernization theory was created and the term “modernization” increasingly began to be used and even decades before the debate on “modernity” could take off in the 1970s. Even more important is the fact that already in Kallen’s early contribution many of the pitfalls of the latter discourse on modernity can be found. And it is also quite remarkable that this thinker (more than many sociologists some generations later) was well aware of the conceptual problems of “modernity” and the aporetic consequences of its use: On the one hand, somehow Kallen seems to be quite self-confident of being able to objectively define “modernity” although he immediately warns his readers that “modernity” is more a “quality” than a “date” – otherwise his reference to science, peace, democracy, and industry would not have made much sense. On the other hand, Kallen seems to realize that the concept is an actor’s category, that it is and will be used by some (minoritarian) groups in a society (and not by others), that actors will grasp and define the concept in order to make political claims so that the concept will unavoidably always mix up analytical and normative questions – at least as long as a full-blown modernity is not yet achieved.

The previous remarks should help to structure the following pages. The first section of this paper will look at the sociological classics and highlight the somehow odd fact of their avoidance of the term modernity (I.) before the broad contours of the discourse on “modernization” as it developed in the 1950s and 1960s will be sketched (II.). It is quite remarkable (and this will be pointed out in section III.) that within sociology from the very beginning the rise of the term “modernity” was accompanied by the diagnosis of a crisis of this very “modernity” so that the term “post-modernity” was indeed an early result of the discourse on modernity although – as will be argued – it never became dominant within the language of sociologists. On the contrary, most of them continued

4. Theodor Adorno/Max Horkheimer.: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Philosophische Fragmente. Mit einem Nachwort von Jürgen Habermas. Frankfurt am Main 1969: S. Fischer Verlag.

to use the term “modernity” although the concept became modified and then “pluralized” as one can see by the use of terms such “second modernity” or “multiple modernities”, “entangled modernities”, “colonial modernities” etc. (IV.). As will be argued in the last section (V.) – and here we will come back to Horace Kallen’s early insights – there is some doubt whether the concept is of much use as an analytical one (V.).

I.

Historical analyses of the earliest origins of the discourse on “modernity”⁵ usually start with the correct observation that equivalent terms to the word “modern” can already be found in antiquity although these analyses also – and again: correctly – emphasize that a viable public debate around these and similar terms did not begin before the 17th-century with the famous “Querelle des anciens et des modernes” in France.⁶ But even then, so it is often argued, the whole debate was thematically rather narrow and circumscribed because it was mostly focused at the field of art thus neglecting adjacent societal spheres such as politics or the economy. Only the advent of the discipline of sociology allowed to fill in this desideratum of the discourse on modernity because it was sociology – so the self-congratulatory story goes – which defined itself as the “science” which came into being in order to study whole societies, *modern* societies, i.e. which took up the heroic task to analyze “modernity”.

The problem with this story is not that it is completely false; one has to say, however, that at least large parts of it are rather anachronistic insofar as it is forgotten that the founding fathers of sociology indeed hardly ever used the term “modernity”. And this despite the fact that – to take the German example – the term “Moderne” (“modernity”) was already coined in the German language in the last quarter of the 19th-century! In 1886 it was literary critic Eugen Wolff who presented it to the German intellectual audience in an essay entitled “Die Moderne. Zur ‘Revolution’ und ‘Reform’ der Literatur” (“Modernity. On the ‘Revolution’ and ‘Reform’ of Literature”).⁷ Although Wolff introduced the term, he defined and spelt it out (as can be seen from the subtitle of his essay) as one

5. Cf., for example, the article „Modern, Modernität, Moderne“ by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, in: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Band 4: Mi-Pre (ed. by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck). Stuttgart 1978: Klett-Cotta, pp. 93-131.

6. Cf. *La Querelle des Anciens et de Modernes – XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles*. Précédé d’un essai de Marc Fumaroli. Paris 2001: Éditions Gallimard.

7. In: *Deutsche akademische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 3, No. 33, Sept. 26th 1886.

of art history and not so much as one to be used for the analyses of epochs in their entirety. Maybe it was this rather narrow focus of Wolff's terminological 'invention' which either prevented the sociological classics from using it or which at least disguised the potentially wider application of this new term. Be it as it may, the sociological discourse of the late 19th and early 20th-century in countries such as France, Germany, Britain, Italy, and the US is full of analytical terms which are further specified by the use of the adjective "modern": German sociologists such as Ferdinand Tönnies, Werner Sombart and Max Weber talked about "modern bureaucracies", referred to the "modern state", and analyzed "modern capitalism"; their French colleagues such as Gabriel de Tarde, Emile Durkheim or Marcel Mauss used expressions such as "société moderne", "religions modernes" or "le monde moderne"; and Americans such as Robert Park and George Herbert Mead talked about "modern life" or "modern communication". And yet, they never used the term "modernity" ("Moderne"; "modernité") in order to define an era or to talk about a "date" (to use Kallen's expression). The only exception seems to have been Georg Simmel who indeed referred to "modernity". But as a more careful look into his oeuvre reveals: It is simply not true that Simmel must be considered as *the* sociologist of modernity as quite a few cultural sociologists claim.⁸ Simmel, to be sure, used the term; but he also very much relied on Baudelaire's thoughts who in the 1860s has famously claimed that "La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitive, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable" (*La Peintre de la vie moderne*, 1863). Baudelaire's and, consequently, his own rather loose definition makes it also quite plausible why Simmel's use of the term "modernity" is not to be found in his major and above all systematic works such as the "Philosophy of Money" but rather in small essays mainly concerned with art and art history.⁹ – Thus the conclusion simply is that sociology didn't establish itself as the science of modernity. Quite the contrary, sociologists usually shied away from using this term which can also be documented by looking into the works of sociologists (and philosophers) who published important works in the period between the two World Wars. Not only that Adorno and Horkheimer, as has already been mentioned in the introduction to this paper, hardly ever talked about modernity in their "Dialectics of Enlightenment" (written in 1944 and

8. David Frisby.: Georg Simmel: First Sociologist of Modernity, in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 2/3 1985, pp. 49-67.

9. Cf. Georg Simmel: *Philosophische Kultur. Gesammelte Essays*, in: Georg Simmel. *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie. Philosophische Kultur. Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 14, hrsg. Von Rüdiger Kramme und Otthein Rammstedt. Frankfurt am Main 1996: Suhrkamp Verlag, here especially p. 346 in Simmel's essay on Rodin.

published three years later): Even more surprising is the fact that the numerous articles and reviews in the nine volumes of the famous “*Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*”, the house organ of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research which was published between 1932 and 1941, hardly ever refer to “modernity”. The only author within and around the circle of so-called Critical Theory who seems to have seriously adopted the term “modernity” was Walter Benjamin, but even in his famous “*Passagen-Werk*”¹⁰ one can hardly ever detect a meaning of the term which would improve on the rather loose coinage as proposed by Baudelaire (and Simmel). There simply was no modernity within sociology, sociologists (and most social scientists) up to the time of the publication of Kallen’s work didn’t live in modernity, at least they didn’t think along these conceptual lines. And as it turned out, even when in the 1950s the discourse on “modernization” started and modernization theory came into being, it was not immediately obvious that a term such as “modernity” was needed as well in order to describe the contemporary world.

II.

The story of the origins of modernization theory is quite well-known. Everything basically started shortly after the end of World War II when President Truman and other US-American policy makers attempted to contain communism by economic means, i.e. by offering resources and know-how to the poorer regions of the world so that the countries there could resist the temptations of socialist ideas.¹¹ Although US-American social scientists originally had enormous difficulties in describing and explaining processes of large-scale-social change to be seen or at least to be expected in the non-western world¹², already in the early 1950s a kind of consensus began to emerge insofar as it was believed that in the end basically all societies will develop modern structures out of traditional ones and that these traditional and modern structures can best be characterized by using Talcott Parsons’s “pattern variables”. From the late 1950s onwards

10. Walter Benjamin.: *Das Passagen-Werk*. 2 Bände, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main 1982: Suhrkamp Verlag.

11. Cf. David Ekbladh.: *The Great American Mission. Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order*. Princeton 2010: Princeton UP; Nils Gilman.: *Mandarin of the Future. Modernization Theory in Cold War America*. Baltimore and London 2003: Johns Hopkins UP; Michael E. Latham.: *Modernization as Ideology. American Social Science and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era*. Chapel Hill and London 2000: University of North Carolina Press.

12. Wolfgang Knöbl.: *Spielräume der Modernisierung. Das Ende der Eindeutigkeit*. Weilerswist 2001: Velbrück Verlag.

the process which pushed traditional societies, characterized by particularistic value-systems, by diffuse role-structures and by hierarchies based on ascription, towards modern societies, characterized by universalistic value-systems, by highly differentiated roles and by a social structure predominantly based on achievement, was increasingly called “modernization”¹³ which also gave the theoretical claims just mentioned their unifying name: “modernization theory”. There is no need to emphasize that the theory was highly teleological insofar as it was assumed that the poorer, less “developed” and “backward” societies will basically all follow the path which “Western” nations have already walked in the past so that a kind of convergence will happen, at least a convergence in economic terms, as was famously claimed by economic historian Walt W. Rostow who expected all countries to enter (sooner or later) the age of high mass-consumption.¹⁴ Systematically and theoretically more important and interesting were two closely interrelated assumptions which usually accompanied the discourse on modernization in the late 1950s and early 1960s: 1) Due to the then hegemony of the paradigm of Structural-Functionalism, it was a kind of common-sense that societies are to be analyzed as integrated wholes in which all the parts are closely interacting with each other so that – with respect to traditional societies – economic change by capital import, for example, will in the end also affect the polity and the culture of such a society, i.e. that economic progress will sooner or later lead to political (democratization) and to cultural progress (individualization, secularization etc.). 2) Thus, “modernization” in fact was a process term at the most general level under which processes at a lower level of aggregation (processes such as urbanization, democratization, bureaucratization, individualization, economic growth, secularization etc.) can be detected which – according to functionalist logic – all support and even strengthen each other. Or to put it differently: The smooth concatenation of the sub-processes just mentioned will add up to a master process called “modernization”.

As it turned out, however, most modernization theorists couldn’t and wouldn’t rely too long on such functionalist reasoning – and not the least for the simple reason that many economically induced developmental processes in the non-western world either failed or – if successful – at least didn’t result also in modernized political and cultural patterns and thus contradicted functionalist

13. One of the first and – at the same time – highly influential books which used the term „modernization“ in a prominent way was Daniel Lerner.: *The Passing of Traditional Society. Modernizing the Middle East*. New York 1958. Free Press.

14. Walt W. Rostow.: *The Stages of Economic Growth. A Non-Communist Manifesto*. Cambridge 1971 [1960]: Cambridge UP.

assumptions. Thus, at a very early phase of modernization discourse causal questions had to be asked, questions concerning the crucial phenomena or carrier groups that might explain why and how – under certain circumstances – processes of social change will lead to thoroughly modernized structures and why and how – under different circumstances – they have only brought disappointing end-results. But all attempts by modernization theorists to find clear-cut causal constellations which could be generalized didn't turn out to be convincing: Whether one insisted on the modernizing effects of mass-media consumption (Daniel Lerner), on the positive role of the middle-classes (Seymour Martin Lipset)¹⁵, on the crucial impact of (intellectual) elites (Edward A. Shils)¹⁶ or even on ripple effects of the military as a modern institution for the surrounding social environment (Samuel P. Huntington)¹⁷ – all these arguments (if at all) were only plausible in a particular context, robust causal claims concerning the crucial and determining factors for processes of modernization could not be found which also means that the status of modernization theory as a *general* theory of social change was quickly undermined.

There were basically two ways to deal with this somewhat hopeless theoretical situation – and all of them, though in different ways, effected the emerging discourse on “modernity”. A) At least some of the theoretically most ambitious authors within modernization discourse began to question the dichotomy between traditional structures/societies and modern ones because it became increasingly clear that the use of Parsons's pattern variables alone might not be sufficient in order to understand the variety and complexity of traditions and traditional structures in the different parts of the world. Are there traditions which are easier to transform (into modern structures) than others and is it really true that modern societies are completely devoid of traditional elements? These were the questions which were increasingly asked since the end of the 1950s! And in this discourse the term “modernity” was more and more used by prominent authors such as Edward A. Shils¹⁸ who, in the early 1960s, talked about intellectuals “between tradition and modernity”, such as Joseph

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15. Seymour Martin Lipset.: *Political Man. The Social Bases of Politics*. Baltimore 1988 [1959]: Johns Hopkins UP.
 16. Edward A. Shils.: The Intellectuals in the Political Development of the New States, in: Jason L. Finkle/Richard W. Gable (eds.), *Political Development and Social Change*. New York, London and Sidney 1966: John Wiley & Sons, pp.338-365.
 17. Samuel P. Huntington.: *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven and London 1968: Yale UP, see especially pp. 222ff.
 18. Edward A. Shils, *The Intellectual Between Tradition and Modernity: The Indian Situation* (Supplement 1 of Comparative Studies in Society and History). The Hague 1961.

R. Gusfield¹⁹ who, a couple of years later, criticized the misplaced polarity between “tradition and modernity”, and such as Shmuel N. Eisenstadt²⁰ who, in the early 1970s, tried to modify classical modernization theory by writing about “tradition, change, and modernity”. Thus, it was exactly in this period that the term “modernity” became indeed fashionable. And yet, one must not forget that in these debates the term most of the time was still not used in the same way we use it nowadays when we talk about “modernity” in the sense of a clearly circumscribed epoch. In the 1960s and early 1970s the term was still more often used as a category to characterizes a phenomenon so when we would talk, for example, about ‘the modernity of social movements’ or the ‘modernity of religion’ etc. It was therefore no accident when – at that time – the German translation of the term “modernity” was usually not “Moderne” but “Modernität” which is much harder to (mis)understand as an attempt to define a whole era and which indeed takes seriously Kallen’s early warning of using modernity as a “date” (see above).

B) Whereas authors such as Shils, Gusfield, and Eisenstadt tried to improve on or revise classical modernization theory, others were somehow more ambitious insofar as they intended to overcome modernization theory’s problems by making the theory more abstract. Still believing in the possibility and necessity of a *general* theory of social change, sociologists such as Talcott Parsons and Neil Smelser (against the intention of early modernization theorists) tried to get rid of causal questions (which obviously couldn’t be answered satisfactorily anyway) and attempted to re-establish evolutionary arguments (which – at least within sociology – had been marginalized in the two or three decades before World War II) by reviving above all the rather old concept of “differentiation”. As, for example, Smelser admitted²¹, “differentiation” is just a descriptive category which doesn’t tell us anything about, for example, the actors who push for or who try to prevent the emergence of more differentiated structures. “Differentiation” simply happens and can be interpreted as a kind of master-concept in order to describe social change. But, so Smelser argued, we certainly shouldn’t be bothered too much by this silencing of causal questions because the use of the concept of “differentiation” at least helps to replace the highly problematic sharp dichotomy between traditional and modern societies and allows sociologists (in a gradual and thus empirically more plausible way) to

19. Joseph R. Gusfield, *Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change*, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 1966/67, Vol. 72, pp. 351-362.

20. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt.: *Tradition, Change and Modernity*. New York 1973: John Wiley & Sons.

21. Neil Smelser.: *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution. An Application to the Lancashire Cotton Industry 1770-1840*. London and Chicago 1959: University of Chicago Press.

talk about less or more differentiated societies and to take into consideration that even highly differentiated modern societies might contain elements which could be considered “traditional”. At this juncture of theoretical discourse the concept of “differentiation” began its rise within post-World War II-sociology, a concept that even today is one of the most important tools being used by all those who want to define “modernity”. Although we are coming back to this topic in the next paragraphs it might be necessary to emphasize already here that the rise of the concept of “differentiation” in particular and of “differentiation theory” in general was not the result of a bold attempt to tackle the causal questions classical modernization theory could never solve, but simply an (should one say: faint-hearted?) attempt to avoid such causal questions.

The discourse on modernization was, as has been shown, at best an important precondition for the rise of the concept of “modernity”, at least in the meaning of the word we are nowadays used to. But it should also be emphasized that this very meaning only came to the fore in another discursive context, namely in one which was primarily occupied with critical diagnoses of contemporary “Western” societies.

III.

Although at least some sociologists have used the term “modernity” in the post-World War II period (notably French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre²²), it is somewhat ironic or at least surprising to realize that, firstly, the boom of modernity discourse happened in an age of crisis and thus took place at a time when scholars and intellectuals in Western societies articulated feelings of distress with respect to the structures of their societies, feelings which could already be detected in the late 1950s and which culminated in the early 1970s: The civil rights movement in the United States, student and feminist movements in basically all Western societies, an unexpected slow-down of economic growth in many Western countries, the first Oil-Price-Shock in 1973 etc., all this seemed to indicate that the economic, social, and political consensus of the growth-years was over, that the covenant between the elites and the rest of the population was somehow broken. Intellectuals, and not only those from the radical left, reacted to these somehow disturbing phenomena by publishing numerous treatises which all intended to diagnose the problems of their respective, i.e. Western societies. In this intellectual discourse, and this

22. *Introduction à la modernité*. Paris 1952: Editions de Minuit.

is the second ironic aspect of the story, these western intellectuals increasingly used the term “modernity” (“Moderne”; “modernité”) in order to make the problems of “their” societies the ones of the whole world because from now on – and with no sense of place! – the term acquired the meaning of a concept suitable to define a whole epoch (and not only particular phenomena or a certain society), i.e. suitable to signify a “date” (Kallen).

In this respect Berger/Berger/Kellner’s book “The Homeless Mind” became one of the most influential diagnoses, a book which, by using the term “modernity”, focused on the loss of the belief in progress and highlighted phenomena in the modern Western world which according to its authors could only be analyzed with the category of “demodernization”.²³ The basic structure of their argument was that modernization has produced institutions and attitudes which often contradict each other and led and lead to experiences of alienation so that, as a result, demodernizing tendencies (the authors point to the rise of esoteric cults and to an anti-capitalist youth culture) can increasingly be seen in Western societies. According to Berger/Berger/Kellner, the present picture of modern societies and of modernity almost necessarily is a confusing one so that they already in the very first pages of the book raise questions such as: Isn’t the meaning of “modernity” too vague? Is it possible at all to detect the beginnings of “modernity”? And last but not least – and this might be called the third irony in this booming discourse on modernity – has modernity not already come to an end if one takes into consideration these demodernizing tendencies?²⁴ Thus, one of the earliest and most influential books which indeed helped to establish the market for treatises on modernity succeeded in establishing the question of the *end* of “modernity” at the very moment when it introduced the term.

The contours of the debates triggered by Berger/Berger/Kellner and others have been quite predictable: Most authors tried to define the institutional setting of modernity by pointing to a particular constellation of different societal spheres which presumable sum up to something to be called “modernity”, spheres such as capitalism, a democratic polity, an autonomous cultural system etc. The terminological tools being used were not so different from the ones already established by modernization theorists and Parsons one or two decades earlier. But the political assessment of the proper functioning of these societal spheres often differed widely. Whereas more conservative authors such as Daniel Bell warned that modern capitalism could be undermined by a hedonistic consumer

23. Peter L. Berger/Brigitte Berger/Hansfried Kellner.: *The Homeless Mind. Modernization and Consciousness*. New York 1973: Random House.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

culture which threatens all the previous achievements of modernity²⁵, authors from the left such as Jürgen Habermas argued that the crisis of modernity is the result of the fact that there is not yet a full-blown modernity and that modernity simply has to use its own potentials developed in European Enlightenment in order to overcome its contemporary contradictions.²⁶ If one looks back to these debates it becomes obvious that most of the time the authors involved simply painted their own favorite picture of “modernity”, emphasized the phenomena they liked best and then started to argue about the true contours of modernity or the problematic deviations from modernity. Thus it is tempting to argue that “modernity” almost from the start became an “essentially contested concept” (W. B. Gallie), one which initiated and still initiates so many debates not only because it is notoriously unclear but also because it is charged with normatively positive connotations so that it is claimed by everyone and thus becomes a kind of weapon which opponents can use in order to fight their discursive battles.²⁷

Although in this debate of the 1970s and early 1980s a whole variety of different pictures of modernity came to the fore (pictures which, to use one example, painted the achievements of the European Enlightenment in bright colors because it is this very Enlightenment which supposedly represents the kernel of modernity even if this modernity might be in danger right now; and pictures, to take a rather different example, which highlighted much stronger the countertrends towards the somewhat sterile Enlightenment thought and stressed the insights of Romanticism), there was a commonality to almost all of them: Most of these pictures were nice to look at insofar as the supposedly truly authentic elements of modernity were all evaluated positively. As a consequence, at that time most theorists (with the exception of those who were strongly influenced by the founders of the so-called Frankfurt School) within this discourse on modernity were forced to exclude the problematic phenomena that also could be detected in this period, phenomena such as wars, racism and the Holocaust, and to declare them either as archaic remnants of a non-modern past or to make them look exotic by arguing that these phenomena happened only in particular regions in which modernization – for contingent reasons – took a somewhat problematic path: This was the starting point of so many debates on national “Sonderwege” (exceptionalisms) that not only

25. Daniel Bell.: *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York 1976: Basic Books.

26. Jürgen Habermas, Die Moderne – ein unvollendetes Projekt, in: Habermas, *Kleine politische Schriften I-IV*. Frankfurt am Main 1981: Suhrkamp Verlag, pp. 444-464.

27. Wolfgang Knöbl, Beobachtungen zum Begriff der Moderne, in: *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, Vol. 37 (1), pp. 63-77.

haunted the discipline of sociology but, even more so, the ones of history and political science.

It took quite a while until this normatively positive picture was seriously questioned and it was probably due to Jean François Lyotard's writings on "post-modernity" that this could have happened. Lyotard was not the one who invented the term "post-modern". Nor was he – as a philosopher – the one who could give a convincing *sociological* account of the (supposedly postmodern) patterns of social change that took place in the 1970s. But Lyotard's "La condition postmoderne"²⁸ at least succeeded in undermining the emphatic invocation of modern values and modern ways of thought which for such a long time have been held beyond any doubt. Lyotard, in contrast, very much emphasized that the typical attitude within modernity, namely to count, to generalize and to universalize, was always in danger of brushing over differences between persons and groups and thus was never far away from suppression and force. If this is so then saying good-bye to modernity and its typical values will presumably have a liberalizing effect – and this effect was the reason why at least from the late 1970s until the late 1980s his "post-modern" ideas were enthusiastically welcomed by many intellectuals so that it looked as if the discourse on *postmodernity* might even supersede the one on modernity. This was not the case, however, although the "experience of postmodernity" was very much in the focus of cultural sociologists. The majority of theoretically ambitious sociologists, hesitated to take over the postmodern rhetoric and postmodernists increasingly lost influence in the late 1990s and after – not the least due to fundamental criticisms.²⁹ And yet, despite all that, one must acknowledge that this postmodernist discourse in the end was highly influential particularly with respect to a reversal of the uncompromising admiration of the achievements of "modernity". It was Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman who was one of the first and undoubtedly most influential sociologists who not only pointed to the dark sides of modernity but who argued that the darkest moments in human history, not the least the Holocaust, could have happened only under the conditions of modernity, that only modern thought with its emphasis on planning, cleansing, levelling out etc. could lead to the fateful idea that parts of the population (Jews, Gypsies, but also homosexuals, political opponents, the mentally ill etc.) had to be removed and in the end to be killed in order to

28. Lyotard.: *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*. Paris 1979: Minuit.

29. Craig Calhoun, Postmodernism as Pseudohistory, in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 1993, 10 (1): 75-96.

establish a pure race, an unbreakable community.³⁰ Thus, modernity has never been innocent but full of hate, war and destruction an insight which could be found in more philosophical terms in the writings of many Critical Theorists from Frankfurt and – arguing from a different perspective – in the works of at least some historical sociologists such as Anthony Giddens who already in the middle of the 1980s had pointed to the violent-prone nation-state system as a constitutive part of modernity³¹, a point that was too often forgotten in many of the treatises on modernity during the 1970s and 1980s. Bauman’s intervention at the end of the 1980s really had a major impact in this respect; the darker sides of modernity couldn’t be neglected any longer. This was a plausible insight not the least because a couple of years before the publication of Bauman’s book Ulrich Beck has written his famous “Risk Society”³² which, though not focusing on violence and genocides, had at least highlighted the often negative side-effects of modern technology and industry and the societal reactions thereupon. This prompted him to argue that the first phase of modernity is over now and that the world approaches a new modernity, one that is – due to global environmental risks – more reflexive than the old one, a “second modernity”.

If one would summarize all these debates on modernity which lasted at least up until the middle of the 1990s, one could probably argue that there was major theoretical progress – at least insofar as the authors involved had offered an increasingly colorful picture of the complex called “modernity” and developed interesting (though often contradictory) arguments concerning the historical beginnings of modernity and its different phases. Here, for example, Alain Touraine’s “Critique de la modernité”³³ should be mentioned which very much focused at the never-ending and continuously changing tensions between the individual on the one side and societal structures on the other. And one must also not forget Peter Wagner’s brilliant book “A Sociology of Modernity”, an institutionalist and comparative study of patterns of change in North America and Western and Eastern Europe.³⁴ But even these master pieces could not hide one of the problems of the then dominant discourse on modernity: Basically all major texts in this genre used “modernity” as a denominator of an era, as

30. Zygmunt Bauman.: *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Oxford 1989: Polity Press.

31. Anthony Giddens.: *The Nation-State and Violence. Volume Two of a Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. Oxford 1985: Polity Press.

32. Ulrich Beck.: *Risikogesellschaft. Der Weg in eine andere Moderne*. Frankfurt/Main 1986: Suhrkamp Verlag.

33. Alain Touraine.: *Critique de la Modernité*. Paris 1992: Fayard.

34. Peter Wagner.: *A Sociology of Modernity. Liberty and Discipline*. London and New York 1994: Routledge.

a “date” (Kallen), but very few of them took up the task to specify carefully *where* this modernity is to be found. It was quite common to talk about “modernity” in general which usually meant that the authors at least implicitly assumed that institutions and processes in Europe and North-America were the very essence of modernity – and the rest of the world will somehow catch up with the West or will at least be affected by Western “modernity”. If this was the case, then the teleology to be found in early modernization theory was undoubtedly still part of the common discourse on modernity. In other words, this kind of reasoning completely neglected the “rest” of the world: Should it be the case that modernity is indeed a “date”, then this “rest” is somehow “out-dated” in the literal meaning of the word. Does it really make sense – so critics began to ask – to argue that only “Western” people live in “modernity”? And if so, in which era do non-western people live? The disturbing oddity of such questions seems obvious – and it was at this point that a new phase in the discourse on modernity began, a phase, in which the pluralization of the term “modernity” became more and more common so that social scientists increasingly began to talk about different types of “modernities”.

IV.

Shmuel N. Eisenstadt was one of the first scholars who seriously began to tackle this problem – from a rather peculiar starting point! Eisenstadt in the 1950s and 1960s had already taken part in the debates within the early modernization-paradigm. But in contrast to many other members of this intellectual milieu, Eisenstadt never really bought the evolutionary ideas of Parsons and Smelser but, on the contrary, insisted that sociology has to deal with causal question and – doing so – must adopt an action-theoretical approach focusing on individual and collective actors.³⁵ At the same time Eisenstadt acknowledged that the assumption of early modernization theorists according to whom the developmental path of modernizing nations will culminate in one (and basically western) model is not only empirically wrong but also false for theoretical reasons since in the process of modernization traditions will not be dissolved but, at most, modified without losing their impact. Traditions, according to Eisenstadt, are essential in analyzing modernizing processes and the contours of modernity. If this is so, then sociology has to take up the difficult task of carefully analyzing traditions – something early modernization theorists never did – and to ask whether

35. Knöbl.: *Das Ende der Eindeutigkeit*, pp. 221-261:

it is possible to make general claims about a whole variety of traditions, i.e. to build different types of traditions, and to analyze how different traditions shape the process of modernization. In other words, Eisenstadt was not satisfied with the solution of early modernization theorists who simply used Parsons’s “pattern variables” in order to define in a rather abstract way tradition per se. Eisenstadt, in contrast, wanted to look theoretically *and* empirically into traditions – and it was this very attempt which led him to the idea of “civilizations” and, in the end, to the concept of “multiple modernities”.

Here is not the place to go into the details of Eisenstadt’s constructive work, but it is probably not too simplistic to argue that Eisenstadt’s attempt to bunch together different traditions was very much based on insights coming from the sociology of religion. By using Karl Jasper’s ideas³⁶, Eisenstadt argued that the origins of major religious currents, which all can be found in the so-called Axial Age, not only very much shaped intellectual horizons but also peculiar constellations of central actors in different parts of the world, so that the Axial Age (the period roughly between 600 and 200 B.C.) was the starting point of civilizational traditions which indeed led to different conflicts and patterns of social change being so strong and stable that they still have effects on the contemporary world. Although it was the Judeo-Christian civilization which, according to Eisenstadt, established structures favoring fast and fundamental social change so that the break-through to the modern world not accidentally happened in the so-called “West”, it would be wrong to argue that peoples outside the Western hemisphere do not live within modernity. The impact of the West on these regions has simply been too strong in order to be neglected and so these very regions reacted to this impact by mobilizing their own civilizational traditions which in the end led to different modernities.³⁷ Thus, according to Eisenstadt, one can talk not only about a European and US-American modernity, but also about a Japanese (though one has to stress that Japan represents a non-Axial-Age-civilization) or a Latin-American one.³⁸ Eisenstadt’s theoretical move, his concept of “multiple modernities”, enormously widened the scope of the debate on modernity – but his whole approach was not spared of oftentimes

36. Karl Jaspers.: *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. Munich 1949: S. Fischer Verlag.

37. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, The axial age: the emergence of transcendental visions and the rise of clerics, in: *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 1982, Vol. 23, pp. 294-314; Eisenstadt, Hétérodoxie, Sectarisme, et Dynamique des Civilisations, in: *Diogenes* 1982, No. 120, pp. 3-25; – Eisenstadt.: *European Civilization in a Comparative Perspective. A Study in the Relation Between Culture and Social Structure*. Oslo 1987: Norwegian UP; Eisenstadt, Multiple Modernities, in: *Daedalus* 2000, Vol. 129, pp. 1-29.

38. Eisenstadt.: *Japanese Civilization. A Comparative View*. Chicago and London 1996: University of Chicago Press.

sharp criticisms which focused on at least three problematic aspects in his work. 1) Critics asked whether it is really plausible to assume such a long-lasting stability of religious traditions and whether it is methodologically feasible to establish such wide-ranging historical linkages between the Axial Age and the contemporary era.³⁹ 2) It was also put into doubt whether one seriously should assume the existence of isolated religious traditions and civilizations or whether it might be empirically more sound to assume that civilizations most of the time interacted with each other and that even the supposedly all-dominant Western civilization didn't come out of nowhere but was also very much influenced by other civilizations. This was the beginning of the debate on so-called "entangled modernities".⁴⁰ 3. Closely related to this last point was the critical question whether it really is a good idea to typify countries along *cultural* and/or *religious* traditions. As authors such as Göran Therborn have argued, it is not only important to acknowledge the aspect of entanglement between different civilizations but also the way *how* this entanglement happened – not the least by means of war and genocide. Emphasizing particularly this last point, Therborn argued that it might be helpful to distinguish between regions of the world, which, among others, were completely overwhelmed by the impact of Western imperialism (regions such as Africa and parts of Asia) and thus had often only very limited resources for their own path into modernity, and those regions which had at least some chances to mobilize in order to resist this Western impact and thus to build alternative modernities.⁴¹ Taking into account colonialism and imperialism, as was the case in Therborn's work, led to further ramifications of the debate on modernities insofar as terms such as "colonial modernities" were created which, in themselves, again were criticized since such a term, as for example Frederick Cooper has argued, gives too much credit to the choices colonial subjects presumably had and thus is in danger of marginalizing the real power-differences between imperialists and their subjects.⁴²

39. Knöbl, Path Dependency and Civilizational Analysis. Methodological Challenges and Theoretical Tasks, in: *European Journal of Social Theory* 2010, Vol. 13 (1): 83-97.

40. Shalini Randeria, Entangled Histories or Uneven Modernities: Civil Society, Caste Solidarities and Legal Pluralism in Post-Colonial India, in: *Unraveling Ties. From Social Cohesion to New Practices of Connectedness* (ed. by Yehuda Elkana). Frankfurt/Main and New York 2002: Campus Verlag, pp. 284-311.

41. Göran Therborn, Different Roads to Modernity and Their Consequences. A Sketch, in: *Decolonizing European Sociology. Transdisciplinary Approaches* (ed. by Encarnación Rodríguez Gutiérrez/Manuela Boatca/Sérgio Costa). Farnham 2010: Ashgate, pp. 71-83.

42. Frederick Cooper.: *Colonialism in Question. Theory. Knowledge, History*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2005: University of California Press, p. 16.

Right now the debate on the pluralization of the term “modernity” is not settled yet. It is probably not very risky to assume that in the very next future the debate will tackle the question of how to bunch together different regions and countries (whether, by doing so, better use a more culturalist approach or go along with Therborn by focusing on power differences) in order to avoid the present danger of the current discourse, namely the tendency to concede every region and every nation in the world its own modernity. An endless pluralization of the term “modernity” simply doesn’t make much sense; the question “How many modernities?” must be answered differently so that building typologies will be a major task in future analyses of modernities.

V.

Despite the fact that – as the previous pages should have shown – it is possible to tell the history of the discourse on “modernity” as a kind of progress story insofar as particularly the recent attempts to pluralize the term have certainly brought to the fore new insights, it is nevertheless not obvious that sociology as a discipline has really profited from this wide-ranging debates on this topic or will do so in the future.

This rather skeptical remark could be justified by pointing to at least two observations. 1) Even if sociologists would really succeed in establishing convincing and robust typologies of modernities bunching together at least some nations or countries (something which – and this should be emphasized – cannot be taken for granted), there is still the problem of how one has to deal with social change *within* a particular type of modernity. One should recall here that in the middle of the 1980s Ulrich Beck famously introduced the term “second” or “reflexive modernity” in order to point to such changes. But since that time virtually dozens of adjectives have been used or even invented in order to point to the changing contours of, for example, European and North-American modernities: “liquid modernity”, “disorganized modernity”, “third modernity” etc. etc. All these adjectives must be interpreted as a clear indicator that sociologists, even when they were exclusively focusing on the “West”, obviously highlight very different aspects in this supposedly “new” modernity which raises the question whether there is indeed any kind of consensus concerning the meaning of modernity per se. What is the common ground for all these modernities so differently characterized? And this leads to the next and much bigger question which might be called the comparative one: What is the common ground between different modernities in different regions of

the world? A recent debate in the “American Historical Review” where mainly *historians* and area specialists have tried to find a common understanding of “modernity”⁴³ should not make sociologists too optimistic with respect to their own future achievements: The authors of the issue of this journal seemed far away from any consensus so that interpreters are tempted to frame the whole debate as one on an “essentially contested concept” (see above), a debate which for that very reason will probably continue endlessly although major results are not to be expected. 2) Looking back at the “modernization”-debate since the 1950s one is struck by the fact that not only the assumption of the smooth concatenation of the sub-processes of modernization (that is “individualization”, “bureaucratization”, “secularization” etc.) has been increasingly put into doubt. More crucial in this respect seems to be the fact that even these very sub-processes came under heavy criticism. No need to mention that, for example, “secularization” nowadays cannot be taken for granted any longer: Even if the battle between defenders and critics of secularization theory is not over yet, it is nevertheless quite clear that in this debate the term “secularization” has been considerably modified, re-defined, and sometimes abandoned. But this did not happen only to “secularization”! Other processual concepts have also come under heavy fire⁴⁴ – not the least the one of “individualization”, since at least the dominant understanding of this term as developed by European authors from Émile Durkheim to Ulrich Beck has been diagnosed as highly problematic when used in non-European contexts.⁴⁵ All this has consequences for any debate on modernity/modernities as well: If the sub-processes are difficult to grasp, then the analysis of change within modernity/modernities becomes an almost hopeless task – at least if one has the intention to make general statements. That this is so can be seen by the more recent debate on “differentiation”: As has been argued in section II, this term has been reinvented in the late 1950s when it became obvious that clear-cut and general statements concerning the causes of social change have failed miserably. “Differentiation” was so welcome because it circumvented causal questions – and it could do so because at that time everyone seemed to agree upon the statement that (whatever the causes of differentiation) the more differentiated a society, the more “modern” it must be

43. AHR Roundtable: Historical Sociology, Modernity, and Postcolonial Critique, in: *American Historical Review* 2011, Vol. 116 (3).

44. Hans Joas, Gefährliche Prozessbegriffe. Eine Warnung vor der Rede von Differenzierung, Rationalisierung und Modernisierung, in: *Umstrittene Säkularisierung. Soziologische und historische Analysen zur Differenzierung von Religion und Politik* (ed. by Karl Gabriel, Karl/Christel Gärtner/Detlef Pollack). Berlin 2012: Berlin UP, pp. 603-622.

45. Kathya Araujo/Danilo Martuccelli.: *Desafíos comunes. Retrato de la sociedad chilena y sus individuos*. 2 Volumes. Santiago de Chile 2012: LOM Ediciones.

called. “Differentiation” became the master concept in order to analyze modernity. No wonder, therefore, that even nowadays authors of almost all treatises on modernity somehow back their arguments with this term in order to make their points.⁴⁶ But, unfortunately, the more recent theoretical and empirical debates on “differentiation” even within those paradigms which traditionally have relied on this concept very strongly, have tended to deconstruct it⁴⁷ which also means that using the concept of “differentiation” becomes less and less convincing in any attempt to “define” modernity.

In sum, current theoretical developments seem to indicate that the conceptual tools used till so far in order to theorize “modernity” or “modernities” are anything but robust and useful. If this is so, then one should not bet too much money on the expectation that in the very next future we will see major breakthroughs in the discourse on modernity/modernities. To put it differently: It cannot be taken for granted that the current debate has to be regarded as a kind of research program which still promises to deliver fruitful results.

Hamburg Institute for Social Research
Leuphana University Lüneburg

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46. Andreas Reckwitz.: *Das hybride Subjekt. Eine Theorie der Subjektkulturen von der bürgerlichen Moderne zur Postmoderne*. Weilerswist 2006: Velbrück Verlag; Hartmut Rosa.: *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity*. New York 2015: Columbia UP. These two German authors are only used as examples; differentiation-theoretical arguments with respect to the discourse on modernity can be found in other national contexts as well.
47. See, as now an almost classical text, Edward A. Tiryakian, On the significance of de-differentiation, in *Macrosociological Theory. Perspectives on Sociological Theory*. Vol. 1 (ed. by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, H.-J. Helle). Beverly Hills: Sage, 1985: pp. 118-134; Uwe Schimank.: *Differenzierung und Integration der modernen Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur akteurzentrierten Differenzierungstheorie 1*. Wiesbaden 2005: VS-Verlag.