When we speak of modernity and of modern societies, we seem to mean one of two things.

First, we may speak as if we were giving an encompassing name to a whole epoch in world history, the modern age, as distinct from, say, the medieval age or classical antiquity. Such a terminology makes it legitimate to discuss questions as to when exactly the modern age may be said to have come into existence, what its origins may have been, or, indeed, if it has now come to an end.

Second, we may speak as if we were actually characterizing distinct phenomena and processes in a given society at a given time. We may say that the technology used in some branch of industry of a country is modern but that patterns of family life are not. It is then an empirical question to determine to what extent different institutions and phenomena of a country may be described as modern.

The first perspective poses the problem of where to locate the beginning, and maybe the end, of the modern age. However, once this has been determined, the question of whether we live in one or many modernities becomes trivial. In this perspective, we all live in the age of modernity, and there is one such age, not many. However, there will of course be an infinite number of possible varieties in cultural patterns, beliefs, and commitments as well as in institutional specificity within the framework of this encompassing epoch. We may then speak of different varieties of modernity, but the term modernity itself refers to those features that are common to the different varieties and that allow us to speak of a modern age in the first place.

This type of usage may be helpful in writing the history of the world backwards. However, if it is to carry any analytic weight, it has to rely on a delimitation of which institutions and practices are the defining ones when we use the term modern to characterize an epoch. Thus, it immediately leads into the second perspective; i.e., something substantive has to be asserted. We have to have an idea of which institutions and habits are modern and which are not. A society is modern only if some key
defining institutions and types of behavior can be said to be modern. To the extent that there is a strong, and growing, coherence and correspondence between such defining institutional structures and behavioral patterns across different countries, hypotheses about the convergence of modern societies may be said to have received increased empirical support. Whatever other differences may or may not exist between different countries is irrelevant when we decide whether any two countries are modern to the same extent or not. Unfortunately, it is precisely at this point that advocates of some version of a theory of convergence, as well as their critics, tend to conflate conceptual and empirical questions.

These advocates, often inspired by the works of Talcott Parsons, tend to speak about all kinds of societal trends and changes of values as giving support for their hypothesis. However, they rarely succeed in defining the necessary conditions that characterize a modern society. Instead, they tend to delve endlessly into empirical questions, such as whether family patterns in the United States and Europe and other parts of the world evolve in a similar or dissimilar direction. This is often interesting, but unless the convergists have told us clearly what all this has to do with the concept of the modern, these empirical debates just blur the basic question about the unity or multiplicity of modern societies. The closest they come to a definition is to speak of certain broad trends such as "the industrial revolution," "the democratic revolution," and "the educational revolution." In the course of the last two centuries, the evolution of these trends is supposed to have been sufficiently similar in at least some parts of the world, and ultimately in all parts of the world, to allow us to speak of a global modern age. The problem with this type of terminology is twofold.

First, the advocates of the theory of convergence, by and large, tend to take the development of one specific society—namely, the United States—as a kind of measuring rod to assess the success or failure of other societies to achieve a sufficient degree of modernity. To the extent that the measuring rod indicates that substantial differences remain in, say, value orientations, religious practices, or family relations, the advocates of this theory tend not to reject or revise the original hypothesis. Rather, they tend to say that it will be confirmed, albeit at a point in the future. In the long run, this is not a very satisfactory procedure.

Second, even if attention is limited to processes of industrialization and democratization in North America and Western Europe in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is quite clear that there have always been very substantial differences between countries. It is simply not true that all these countries have had roughly similar types of economic and political institutions in this historical period. If this were only a matter of some technical peculiarities and divergences, it need not concern the basic question of the convergence of all modern societies or, at the very least, of all modern Western societies. However, this is not the case. Throughout the last two centuries there have been deep differences between Western countries in the way a society, a market economy, and modern political forms are best organized.

To take but one example: most European countries have assigned a much more prominent role to the state in overseeing and indeed in shaping market interactions than has North America. In many of these countries the state has not been seen just as a form of rulership but, to paraphrase Hegel, as the embodiment of the idea of ethical life, with a specific task of shaping the framework for all other societal interactions, including the economy and the family. In this perspective, civil society can only flourish if it occurs within this encompassing ethical framework, not in spite of it or in opposition to it. This may of course be discarded as just a sign of their lack of democratic maturity, a failure that will be remedied in due, if distant, course. Unfortunately, such an explanation will not do. Rather, it is precisely some of those countries in North-Western Europe that by any reasonable measure are among the most economically open and the most politically democratic that have the closest web of interactions between their economic, political, and family institutions. It is there, and not in authoritarian settings, that civil society and the state form a seamless web of mutually supporting institutional structures.
The economic order associated with the modern age is often seen to be that of a liberal market economy and free trade, the political order that of a nation-state or a constitutional republic. In order to qualify as modern democratic orders, these polities are assumed to have the institution of free elections that determine the composition of the executive of the polity. Even if we limit our attention to the European setting, we run into immediate problems if we take these forms of economic and political order to be necessary defining characteristics, the sine qua non, of the modern era. It is sometimes customary to speak of the late nineteenth century as a period of organized or interventionist modernity and capitalism as opposed to a previous period of more genuine and nonregulated forms of economic order. This is true for some countries, such as Britain. For many others there simply was no previous period of noninterventionist market interactions and free trade. In these countries, as already indicated, a state-oriented economic order was not a late aberration. It was constitutive of the economic order of modernity from its very inception. Of course, even in these countries there was a break with many previous forms of regulation via princely decrees and the operation of guilds, but their economy was always a far cry from an unregulated market with free international trade. Indeed, as late as the 1930s most Western countries were imposing drastic restrictions on imports with a concomitant sharp decline in world trade.

As to political order, the situation is even more problematic. Until the end of World War I, what was as the time called the Great War, virtually no European country had the type of political order that theorists now define as emblematic of modernity, i.e., that of a democratic nation-state. The central and eastern part of Europe was composed of multinational imperial polities that were neither nation-states nor democracies, i.e., polities where electoral outcomes had a decisive effect on governance and the composition of the executive. Most of these polities were in a process of transition toward various forms of constitutional monarchy, often with some form of elected national assembly as a complement, or indeed a balance, to a government still more or less closely linked to the prerogatives of the monarch.

In the western part of Europe, at the turn of the nineteenth century, most countries were in a period of often slow and highly embattled transition from forms of constitutional monarchy to some form of parliamentary democracy. Some of these countries (such as Britain, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries) could draw on age-old traditions of parliamentary assemblies and local self-government. However, none of these countries could be said to have been full-blown parliamentary democracies by the turn of the nineteenth century. Even in the France of the Third Republic, suffrage was limited by gender and was not to be extended to women until after World War II. Paradoxically, Finland--still a grand duchy within the Russian empire--could in the first decade of the new century present maybe the most modern and democratic form of representation in Europe. Thus, the traditional national assembly, composed of the representatives of four estates, was transformed into one based on the principle of universal suffrage for women and men in a unicameral national assembly (where the socialists came to have 40 percent of the seats). This constitutional miracle occurred after the defeat of Russia in the war against Japan of 1904--1905. Not surprisingly, within the overall autocratic framework of the Russian empire, with its tendencies toward new forms of imperial nationalism, this reform did not lead to a wholesale transition to parliamentary democracy.

MODERNITY: ONE OR NONE?

We have arrived at the conclusion that a temporal conception of modernity ultimately rests on a substantive one. However, as just outlined, a substantive conception--one that defines modernity in terms of the prevalence of a few key societal institutions of the political and economic order--seems to lead to the absurd result that modernity has a very short history, even in the European context. Modernity is suddenly reduced to a phenomenon that can be found in some parts of Western Europe during some periods of the twentieth century. Indeed, for modernity as a general phenomenon of Western Europe, the relevant time period would be that after World War II, and even shorter if all of Europe is considered. Modernity would barely have arrived in time to witness its own demise as
heralded by the prophets of postmodernism. Given the facts of institutional history, this conclusion is hard to avoid. Yet it makes a mockery of innumerable literary, political, and scholarly debates throughout Europe in the course of the nineteenth century about the coming of the modern age. It would mean that we might have to ask whether there has ever been any truly modern society in Europe. Maybe European institutions were never as modern as social scientists have claimed. Maybe theories of modernity are little but an ideology of late-nineteenth-century social science.

There is some truth in an affirmative response to these hypotheses. As a general statement, however, it would be seriously misleading. There have, indeed, been profound qualitative changes in the institutional and intellectual landscape of Europe, but also of the world at large, in the course of the last two centuries. Unfortunately, social science has had great difficulties in providing a coherent account of these changes. A major reason is that such an account can only be provided if the cultural constitution of modernity is brought back in, and this is precisely the side of its own legacy that social science has tended to neglect. The institutional projects of modernity--be they a democratic nation-state, a liberal market economy, or a research-oriented university--cannot be understood unless their grounding in profound conceptual changes is recognized. Ultimately, these institutional projects were premised on new assumptions about human beings, their rights and agency. These conceptual changes entailed promissory notes that came to constitute new affiliations, identities, and, ultimately, institutional realities.

Promissory notes in this sense presuppose that six conditions are met. First, they point to desiderata that can be formulated as statements about a range of achievements that may be reached by the members of a given community. Thus, a promissory note is not just a vague desire or fleeting preference. It refers to a state of affairs that may be expressed in explicit terms. Second, this state of affairs refers to the situation not of an individual but of a community. Third, this state of affairs is not just something to be hoped for in general; it is something that may validly be expected and may be regarded as implied by deeply held values. Thus, it, fourth, depends for its assertability on the validity of claims about the nature and history of human beings as members of the posited community. In particular, as will be highlighted later on, the promissory notes of modernity depend on a range of new conceptualizations of human beings and their ability to act individually and collectively about their place in history as well as about the proper forms of polity and social belonging. Ultimately, these kinds of assumptions have been related to some of the most basic ideas of an ontological and cosmological nature inherent in a culture.

Fifth, at any given point in time, the prevalent political institutions of a society embody and give expression to a range of promissory notes. These institutions, in other words, imply the reasonableness of a set of expectations that members of the community of these institutions feel entitled to assume as valid and legitimate and which they take for granted as a matter of course.

It is important to see that any polity implies some such set. It is also important to see that any new set of promissory notes will be formulated against such a background. Thus, it will be articulated in the context of existing political macroinstitutions and the promissory notes that they officially proclaim as the legitimate ones. The new set will always be presented so that it either reaffirms and resurrects the original set or rejects and transcends it. In periods of major cultural crystallization, the latter mode--of rejection and transcendence--will be the prevalent one.

Sixth, promissory notes are not just expressible in principle. They have to have been put forth in some public forum. In the age of modernity, these fora have been of a particular type, namely, public spheres. Public spheres are fora where common matters are the focus of debate and deliberation but where discourse is not only occurring about the rulers and form of rulership. It has to be a discourse to which access is in principle open and that is, furthermore, also directed at the rulers and often enough carried on with the objective of influencing or changing the polity and the sphere of officialdom.
If so, modernity cannot be identified just with a successful industrial and democratic revolution. It has to be understood in terms of promissory notes that served as ever more generalized reference points in debates and in the formation of affiliations and the creation of new institutional forms. The term generalized reference point means that the promissory notes serve not only as a point of departure for various projects and proposals to realize the ideas of the promissory notes. Precisely because they become generalized reference points, they also serve as points of departure for counter-proposals and for efforts to reinvigorate promissory notes contained in older institutional forms.

In this perspective the age of modernity is characterized by the fact that the opponents of emblematic modern institutions cannot but express their opposition, cannot but formulate their programs with reference to the ideas of modernity.

Thus, modernity may be understood as culturally constituted and institutionally entrenched. Promissory notes may serve as generalized reference points in debates and political confrontations. However, these generalized reference points not only become focal points in ideational confrontations; they also provide structuring principles behind the formation of new institutions. It is only in a perspective of this type that it makes sense to talk about modernity as having a European history extending across the past two centuries.

ORIGINS OF WESTERN MODERNITY

Despite important similarities to earlier periods of crystallization, the cultural constitution of a set of new macrosocietal institutions at the turn of the eighteenth century set the stage for a new era in world history. This is so not because of a triumphant breakthrough of reason and light. In fact, even if attention is restricted to just some areas of Western Europe, the notion of an actual realization of those institutional projects associated with modernity at a precise moment in time is highly misleading. Furthermore, the configuration of those institutional practices, e.g., the role of a civil society and a public sphere relative to state power, has always been quite different in different parts even of Western Europe.

Thus, a meaningful notion of modernity that does not involve a historicist misreading of complex processes and events will, as already emphasized, also have to bring in the relationship of various institutional projects to cultural and cognitive projects. This is so not merely because these institutions exhibit features that differ from those of previous periods. An equally important justification for the use of the term modernity has to do with the promissory notes of these new institutional projects and the extent to which they were based on radically new presuppositions about human agency, historical consciousness, and the role of reason in forging new societal institutions.

The modern world emerged out of processes of industrialization, urbanization, and political upheaval at the northwestern edge of the Eurasian landmass. They caused societal transformations across the world to become so deeply dislodged by European and North American preeminence as to almost remove from vision a whole range of earlier forms of political and cultural order. Far from being just "traditional," these societies, as they were evolving in different parts of the world in the period of the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, often underwent rapid internal change. This is equally true of, to take but three examples, Ming China, Tokugawa Japan, and Mogul India. [2]

Yet the formation of modernity in the European context was a process that differed from developments elsewhere in the world and in other epochs of European history. Of course, the European paths to the formation of distinctly modern societies in the course of the last two centuries have roots. Thus, it may be possible to speak of a type of early modernity already in the European context in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when four interconnected processes of deep transformation occurred. An important element was the emerging realization, in the wake of the so-called Papal Revolution, that the long-standing de facto separation of ecclesiastical and mundane power was likely not to be overcome but to
remain a key feature of the ecumene of Western Christendom. Equally important was what has come to be termed the Feudal Revolution, involving an articulation of a variety of rights and obligations that could be claimed and upheld in various public fora.

The growth of urban life--the Urban Revolution--not only entailed a stimulus for trade and economic activities; it also tended to be associated with wide-ranging municipal self-government. In some parts of the Holy Roman Empire where effective imperial power had become greatly weakened, such as Northern Italy, new forms of city republican rule took shape. Sometimes modeled on an association for common trade purposes, city republican government came to exert a deep influence on notions of political rulership in Europe. In the same period, universities were formed as a particular type of self-governing corporation with at least partial autonomy from the Church. This set the stage for an intellectual revolution both in scholarly activities themselves and in the possibility of multiple fora for intellectual activities, nested in a multiplicity of political and institutional arenas across a Europe that yet formed part of one ecumenical order, that of Western Christendom. Similarly, the breakdown of this ecumenical order and the emergence of territorially delimited polities from the late fifteenth century onward created a set of unique preconditions.

It is possible to depict the formation of modernity in Europe as the result of a series of basically continuous processes where political, economic, and intellectual transformations mutually reinforced and conditioned each other. There is indeed a specific path of development that originated in those parts of the European continent that bordered on the Atlantic seaboard and that had a plurality of intellectual and political fora as a key characteristic. It would be possible to trace the diffusion of analogous forms of societal organization in space and time. It would involve an analysis of Western Christendom, but also of parliamentary assemblies, urban self-government, and universities as sites of learning across the vast regions of Central and East-Central Europe. It would trace the impact of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the establishment of a system of mutually balancing territorially delimited states, and the Enlightenment, but also a period of great revolutions ushering in the formation of new types of political order. It may seem unreasonable to impose artificial notions of different epochs or ages on the continuous flow of loosely structured events in historical time. Such an account would run a risk of just reproducing the inevitable complexities of historical changes without contributing to an understanding of them. In particular, it would underestimate the rupture that occurred in both institutional and intellectual terms in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The events involved did not emerge ex nihilo, but they involved the appearance of a radically new configuration of phenomena, the formation of distinctly modern societies.

THE CULTURAL CONSTITUTION OF MODERNITY

There is, as argued throughout this essay, a need for a fundamental revision of a long-standing and predominant view among social scientists, as well as in lay debates, about the formation of modernity in terms of a conjunction of a technological and a political transformation--the industrial and the democratic revolutions, respectively. This traditional interpretation radically underestimates the deep-seated epistemic transformation that occurred at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are reasons to examine the ways in which distinctively modern key concepts of an understanding of society emerged during the great transition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

One such shift pertains precisely to the concepts of society and history, and to the new awareness of the structural and constraining nature of societal life beyond the domain of communicative interactions, in the political sphere proper. Thus, there is a transition to a social science that transcends the boundaries of the political sphere proper but also traces the implications and conditions of that sphere much further than the old political philosophy. Pierre Manent has put forward the notion that society is a "postrevolutionary discovery." [3] True enough, and as is convincingly demonstrated by Keith Baker, the term society undergoes a long conceptual development in the French context in the course of the
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—with a dramatic increase in the utilization of the term in the mid-eighteenth century. It is also true that, in his critique of Louis Dumont's analysis of Western individualism and holism, Marcel Gauchet argued that (this is Baker's elegant summary):

Individualism was not simply a symptom of the dissolution of the primacy of the social whole, as that had been understood in traditional religious terms. It was also a necessary condition for what he once again called (following Karl Polanyi) the "discovery of society"--its discovery in strictly sociological terms, disengaged from the religious representations in which it had hitherto expressed its existence. Not until the ideological primacy of individual interests was postulated, he argued, could constraints upon these interests be discovered in the operation of an autonomous social order subject to its own laws. [4]

Johan Heilbron has pursued an inquiry into the constitution of individual interests. [5] In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such interests were conceived as amenable to the constraints of various notions of sociability. In particular, given a human condition short of true religious virtue, was there a prospect for a human existence beyond the borders of a Leviathan-like imposition of absolute order that would involve socially acceptable outcomes of the pursuit of the self-interests of human beings? Such inquiries were pursued in various ways in the different parts of Europe throughout the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. However, Heilbron and many others today agree that, even if there is a long process of gestation of the modern concept of society, the unique event of revolutionary upheaval requires that discursive controversy and political practice become joined in the formation of a distinctly modern era. Pierre Manent has elaborated a similar argument: "The Revolution offered the original spectacle of a political change of unheard-of scope, yet having no stable political effects, of a political upheaval impossible to settle, of an interminable and indeterminate event." [6]

This description of revolution as an irreversible and interminable process of fundamental change was formulated perhaps most clearly by one of the most well-known thinkers of the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville. In his memoirs, Souvenirs, written in the summer of 1850, he describes revolution as one long upheaval "that our fathers have seen the beginning of and which, in all likelihood, we shall not see the end of. Everything that remained of the old regime was destroyed forever." [7]

In fact, Reinhart Koselleck's conception in his early work Kritik and Krise is quite similar. He also links the temporal duration of the process of upheaval to its spatial, and indeed worldwide, extension, as well as to its increasing intensity in terms of modernity as a process that affects all human beings, not just, say, those in central political institutions or certain major cities:

The eighteenth century witnessed the unfolding of bourgeois society, which saw itself as the new world, laying intellectual claim to the whole world and simultaneously denying the old. It grew out of the territories of the European states and, in dissolving this link, developed a progressive philosophy in line with the process. The subject of that philosophy was all mankind, to be unified from its European centre and led peacefully towards a better future. [8]

Precisely because the eighteenth century witnessed the creation of a political project encompassing the whole world and at the same time shattering the existing absolutist order, the main agent of this change, the European bourgeoisie, opened up horizons of expectations that were previously unknown: "The eighteenth century can be seen as the antechamber to our present epoch, one whose tensions have been increasingly exacerbated since the French revolution, as the revolutionary process spread extensively around the globe and intensively to all mankind." [9] However, it is also this sense of openness and contingency that serves as a forceful impetus to an examination of the structural conditions of the political body and entails a passage from political and moral philosophy to a social science.
This transition entails that five key problematics---which today are more acutely open to reinterpretation than they have been for decades, if not for a century--are being formulated or at least fundamentally reformulated and are entering into the new social-science discourse.

First, the whole role of historical inquiry becomes a crucial one. On the one hand, historical reasoning becomes an integral part of the intellectual transition, and even abstract reason itself becomes historicized in early-nineteenth-century philosophy. However, on the other hand, the moral and political sciences break up into a variety of new discourses that in the course of the nineteenth century coalesce and are reduced to a number of disciplines. This means that the stage is set for the divergence between a professionalized historical discipline and the other social and human sciences, a divergence that we still today experience as a major intellectual divide.

Second, interest in language and linguistic analysis enters into all domains of the human and social sciences as a key problematic. One outflow of this is the constitution of textual and hermeneutic modes of analysis. A second one--familiar from contemporary debates on linguistic analysis and poststructuralism--is the relationship between text, interpretation, and consciousness. A third one is the effort to historicize language and linguistic development itself. Thereby a crucial link was provided to various collective entities such as the historic construction of the notion of different peoples.

This leads to a third problematic: that of constituting new collective identities. Membership in a collectivity could no longer be taken for granted in the life experiences of the inhabitants of a certain village or region. Nor could a relationship of obligation and loyalty between the princely ruler and his subjects continue to constitute an unquestionable core of the body politic. That, however, meant that even the most basic categories of societal existence were open to doubt.

In the late eighteenth century, categories such as ruler and subject were by no means irreversibly superseded. They are, however, open to doubt and, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, to the necessity of reconstitution. This in turn meant a deep challenge to those imperial-like political entities that remained the dominant form of political order in the eastern part of Europe until the end of World War I. In the western part, categories such as "citizen" and "compatriot" capture some of the results of these processes of reconstitution. Robert Wokler, perhaps more clearly than anyone else, has issued a strong warning against any hasty equating of the French revolutionary notion of a nation-state with a commitment to a truly universal conception of rights of human beings. [10]

Fourth, as repeatedly emphasized, the whole problematic of the relationship between notions of polity, society, and civil society was succinctly and acutely reformulated in this period of transition. The fact that once again these notions are probed and fundamentally reexamined should not conceal that they were indeed in many ways not just reformulated in this period but rather discovered or even invented.

Fifth, assumptions about what prompts human beings to act and how to interpret their actions within a broader framework are at the very core of any scholarly program in the social and human sciences. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the fundamental categories that we still by and large draw upon were elaborated and proposed. Three or four such fundamental categorical conceptualizations were propounded. Each of them corresponded to a conceptualization of what comprised "society." These categories might be described as follows:

(a) Economic-rationalistic, with a corresponding view of society as a form of compositional collective;
(b) Statistical-inductive, with a view of society as a systemic aggregate;
(c) Structural-constraining, with a view of society in terms of an organic totality; and
(d) Linguistic-interpretative, with a conceptualization of society as an emergent totality.
The transition from a discourse on moral and political philosophy to a social science--analyzed, for example, by Robert Wokler [11]--in rudimentary form had already taken place in the mid- and late 1790s in France after the Revolution. It entails a decisive shift from an agential--some would say voluntaristic--view of society to one that emphasizes structural conditions. To some extent, a similar shift occurs in economic reasoning away from a broad concern about moral and political agency. In the course of the nineteenth century, "average economic man" instead becomes cast in a web of structural properties and dynamic regularities rather than in a moral universe of individual action.

Thus, fundamental categories of agency and society that came to be elaborated and refined during much of the rest of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be discerned in rudimentary form already during the great transition. So too, however, can some of the more or less tacit, explicit features that came to affect these endeavors.

One such tacit but crucial feature concerns the abandonment of the truly universal heritage of the Enlightenment project in favor of forms of representation and endowment of rights based on territoriality or membership in a linguistically and historically constituted and constructed community. Another feature was an emerging and growing chasm between moral discourse and other forms of reasoning about society. Thus, an earlier encompassing conception of the moral and political sciences was gradually replaced by social sciences that relegated moral reasoning to a marginal position or to a place within the specialized discipline of philosophy. Third, historical reasoning, which had been at the core of the intellectual transformation at the turn of the eighteenth century, also came to find a place as one separate discipline, and toward the end of the nineteenth century a permanent divide had emerged between history and the social sciences. This divide remains today but was unknown to the late-eighteenth-century moral and political philosophers.

We may summarize the previous argument by stating that modernity, as it took shape in Europe, was premised not just on "a package of technological and organizational developments." [12] Rather, it was the constitution of a set of institutional projects of a specific nature. Thus, the institutions were not just new, but they were to serve as vehicles for the enhancement of a continuous process of innovation. At the same time, the institutional frameworks themselves were to be endowed with stability precisely because they were claimed to be premised on universalistic rather than on particularistic assumptions about human beings, human agency, and human societies.

Of course, there was a wide array of contesting philosophical schools and political groupings. However, across confrontations and divergences there existed a fundamental acknowledgment of the idea that agency, reflexivity, and historical consciousness might help construct a new set of institutions. Thus, there existed a limited number of thematic foci underlying the cultural constitution of a new set of societal macroinstitutions.

THE INSTITUTIONAL FORMATION OF MODERNITY

In the wake of the deep cultural shift at the turn of the eighteenth century, a distinctively new set of institutional projects emerged that became emblematic of the modern world at large. One such project concerned economic organization in the form of a liberal market economy rather than a regulated mercantilist economy. Similarly, political order came to be conceptualized as a modern nation-state of compatriots or as a constitutional republic of fellow citizens rather than in the form of an absolutistic monarchy with its distinction between ruler and subjects. In the realm of private interactions, new demands arose for a legally protected sphere where the state was only allowed to make interventions and undertake sanctions that were clearly specified and foreseeable.

The focus on the nature of the public sphere and political order was thus based on ontological assumptions of a new nature about human beings. For the first time the idea of ethical life was premised on a radical and irreversible stance about the principled equal rights of all human beings to
participate in the macroinstitutions of the public sphere and of the state. In this sense, the formation of modernity in Europe was not just another period reminiscent of the axial age or of the early emergence of a bifurcation between secular and sacred power in Europe.

In the political sphere, the new institutions involved a conception of political order as constituted and legitimated in terms of not only silent tolerance but also some form of active acquiescence and participation. Thus, centuries-old ideas of representation in the form of estates and parliaments were complemented with demands for participation and even popular sovereignty. In the western part of Europe, the wave of demand associated with these ideas, what Parsons referred to as the Democratic Revolution, [13] was a constant feature of political life from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century when they were finally victorious across the board. In political terms, it had entailed the gradual limitation of constitutional monarchial regimes and their eventual replacement by some form of parliamentary democracy. In the Central-Eastern part of Europe, the transition from absolutistic to constitutional monarchies was by no means complete in the wake of World War I.

In the private sphere, there were parallel developments: age-old demands that princely rulers abstain from acts of arbitrary intervention and violence were superseded by demands that there be a legal-rational basis for all actions of government. Thus, official acts are legitimate only if they are based on legal rules that are transparent and allow for consequences of actions to be predictable. Such transparency and predictability can become a reality only if the nature of political order accepts as a basic principle the rule of law rather than the volition of the princely ruler as its basic principle of operation. Such demands not only for legal protection but also for the universal application of legal order had long traditions in some--but by no means all--European countries. At the turn of the eighteenth century, however, they were voiced with increasing intensity. Furthermore, their urgency was reinforced by the demands of new commercial and industrial activities.

New public spheres also emerged outside of courts, academies, and salons, outside of the control and purview of royal sanction and control. Whether in scholarly, political, or artistic life, fora are created that are based on the idea that public discourse should not be subject to persecution or censorship but should rather enable the expression of opinion on all aspects of political and public life. One may say that these fora were premised on the legitimate articulation of a discourse not only about but addressed to and critical of the official power of the state.

In what sense do these different institutional projects constitute a societal form that we may associate with the notion of modernity? Clearly it would be highly misleading to suggest that these projects became universally realized in the European context at the time of their intellectual conception. Nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, the new institutional projects remained embattled and highly controversial in practical affairs in Europe throughout the following century and a half. Even if our attention is limited to the western part of Europe, most European states in that region were still constitutional monarchies rather than parliamentary democracies by the end of the nineteenth century. In the eastern part, as already pointed out, the transition from absolutistic to constitutional monarchial forms of government was by no means complete by the turn of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, across Europe on the eve of World War I, radical conservatives spoke of the ideas of 1914 as finally putting an end to the detrimental effects of those of 1789. Even in Western Europe, a modern political order in terms of truly universal suffrage did not become a full institutional reality until the end of World War II. Despite these facts, it is still possible to speak in a meaningful way of modernity and its institutional projects as a societal reality in a specific sense of the word: namely, as a new set of promissory notes. These promissory notes, formulated and promulgated and even partially implemented, if for brief periods of time, at the turn of the eighteenth century, came to have global relevance. At their core were notions of self-reflexivity, agency, and historical consciousness. These institutional projects became the object of continuous discursive and institutional battles; they could never again be exorcised from the attention of such battles in the European context. This is what Tocq
ueville stated so clearly in his memoirs.

The Vienna Congress and the Holy Alliance were a comprehensive effort to unthink the consequences of the French Revolution and to restore the Old Regime and make Europe safe for tradition. It became almost immediately clear that this program was an unrealizable one in the French context. Even the political thought of the pro-resurrection forces found it impossible to return to the intellectual landscape of pre-Revolutionary France. Instead, France witnessed in the 1810s and 1820s not only the confrontation of such post-revolutionary reactionary thought with a strong tradition of radical political thought but also the unexpected rise of a live liberal discourse. Similarly, the period of fundamental, if centrally and state directed, reform efforts in Germany in a few years after the defeat of Prussia in its war of 1806 against Napoleon was a decisively brief one. Yet its implications became a permanent feature of intellectual and political life far beyond the borders of the German lands. Even in absolutist Russia, the Decembrist rising of 1825, easily put down by the regime, was not an isolated event, but the first in a long series of decisively modernist political projects, often enough of a desperate nature, throughout the following century.

The new institutional projects, whether they were adopted or, as was initially often the case, rejected, became inevitable reference points on a truly global scale. It is this feature that makes it possible to talk about modernity without unduly imposing a rigid and misleading institutional gridlock on an unwieldy and complex historical reality. Thus, modernity is not equivalent to universal acclaim of a small set of philosophical principles or the endorsement and implementation of a few crucial institutional projects. Such universal acclaim has never existed in any European country at any point in time. Universal adoption of a set of institutions did not exist until the very recent past, and then only in parts of Europe. Furthermore, even in those cases when these institutions became a societal reality early on, their internal relationships differed dramatically. Even more important, there is an urgent need to rethink the collapse of whole regimes of promissory notes.

GOOD-BYE TO ALL THOSE HOPES: RETHINKING TWO FIN-DE-SIECLES

At the turn of the nineteenth century it seemed in the self-understanding of the intellectual, political, and cultural elite of Europe and America alike as if the crisis of modernity were about to be overcome. Thus, the dangers of an unbridled market economy might be countered through well-informed social policies. The naive scientific determinism of a previous era might be overcome through an appreciation of the importance of volition and aesthetic judgment. Antiquated and inefficient bureaucracies--preoccupied, in Strindberg's famous phrase, with administering the payment of their own salaries--might be replaced by a legal-rational bureaucracy appropriate for a modern constitutional polity. World exhibitions heralded the arrival of a new era of air and light. It was to be an era of industrial growth without pollution, of social change with an appreciation of traditional values and customs, of urban growth amidst garden cities and newly invented pastoral landscapes, of global communication and movement without friction, of social development without strife, of national competition without war. National assertiveness was to be contained in colonial endeavors and Olympic games. An increasingly nationally important science was to thrive amidst international conferences.

To liberals at the turn of the century, constitutional rule, property rights, and parliamentary democracy seemed to be within reach everywhere in the civilized world. Yes, even colonies might be elevated in due course to the status of dominions and equal partners once they had achieved the required level of maturity. It was possible to envisage a world of measured civility, personal self-control, and political home rule, with violence and uncontrolled impulses relegated to the outer fringes of the civilized world, whether distant deserts and mountains or the inaccessible interior of persons and continents, those hearts of darkness.

To the conservatives, it seemed as if the long nightmare of the Paris commune, of uprooted and
enraged masses rising in armed rebellion, had subsided for good and that social order was as stable as can be. Conservative intellectuals even seemed to hold out the promise that the pernicious and divisive ideas of 1789 might be relegated to the ideological past. And the socialists, confident with a steady growth of parliamentary representation and membership in trade unions and the socialist party, and, with the Socialist International, a firm guarantee of perpetual peace, proudly proclaimed that the new century was to become the century of socialism. And some utopians even spoke of the new century as the century of the child, if so the first in the history of humankind.

Today, at the end of a century, these expectations of a time long past cannot but evoke sadness. The tragedies of the twentieth century are of such scale that they evade our imagination even when we are cognitively aware of them. It is today almost unimaginable to consider the time when tens of thousands of soldiers were sent, with the consent of their governments and the blessing of public opinion in their home countries, each day to their deaths during the major battles of the Great War. It is unfathomable how socialists and pacifists could imagine that permanent peace and universal brotherhood were just around the corner when in fact the scale of bloodletting rapidly came to overtake even the horrors of the religious and civil wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The fear of revolution, the fear of the masses and of the revolt of the lower classes, had deeply and for long perturbed conservatives. However, it could never have presaged the ruthlessness and terror that the very same Bolshevists who had so eloquently condemned the Tsar for his policies of imprisonment and deportations would soon embark upon themselves, if on a vastly larger scale.

To read accounts today from World War I of how Jewish inhabitants of towns and cities in Eastern Europe warmly welcomed German and Austrian troops because in ousting the Russians they were seen to bring orderliness and safety is like reading an account from an unknown and unimaginable world. It is even difficult for us today to read Klaus Mann's autobiographical notes, The Turning Point, and to realize that German high culture in Prague was by and large a Jewish culture. It is painful to learn that Kafka's short stories, his tormented accounts of human trauma--and think about that most terrible story, "In the Penal Colony," a story painfully difficult to read with the knowledge of the events of the 1930s and 1940s--when read aloud in literary salons in Prague in the 1920s, were met with laughter, as hilariously humorous accounts of the frail human condition. [14]

When Friedrich Paulsen wrote his account for the great university exposition in Chicago in 1893, he did not doubt for a moment that German science and German higher education epitomized the highest achievements of scholarship. American scholars, in particular Abraham Flexner, by and large agreed. When reading Paulsen--later so much admired by educational scholars and teachers around the world, including Mao Tsetung--or Weber, or Dilthey, or Husserl, or Meinecke, or Hintze, it is not possible to envisage that anywhere in their thinking was the notion that Germany, within a few decades, might be nothing but a heap of rubble, a devastated pariah nation, guilty of crimes beyond comprehension, that the high culture all these scholars so much admired and epitomized was but one step on the road to the German catastrophe.

To write about modernity today without rethinking these fundamental breaches of the promissory notes of modernity is simply not possible. They have forced processes of cultural reinterpretation that are yet to be completed.

MODERNITY: ONE OR MANY?

Modernity may thus be delineated in terms of a conjunction, with global implications, of a set of cultural, institutional, and cosmological shifts. In the contemporary discussion about the uniformity or diversity of modern societies, two positions have occupied a prominent place outside of academic discourse. First, there is a stance that might be labeled liberal historicism. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, liberal democracy and market economy, in the particular form that these institutional practices have come to exhibit in recent decades in parts of North America and Western
Europe, are seen to provide the sole legitimate models of social organization. These forms will then come to be embraced, if with time lags, across the world. Needless to say, the adherents of this view are not so naive as to assume that this type of global diffusion would entail a development toward cultural, or even linguistic, homogeneity. It does, however, mean that there is no reason to expect any fundamental institutional innovation that would transcend these types of liberal institutional arrangements.

If such an innovation were to occur, it would be unreasonable in an almost Hegelian sense and would entail a departure from modernity, not its further development or variation. This sense has been nicely captured by the philosopher Richard Rorty: "More important, I think that contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement.... Indeed, my hunch is that Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution that it needs." [15] Other less sophisticated liberals have expressed beliefs in the coming emergence of a common global political and cultural order. It is ironic to observe that these views tend to exhibit as many features in common with the political culture of the home countries of the authors as Hegel's views ever did with early-nineteenth-century Prussia. To that extent, these arguments are open to the same kinds of objections that have been taken up earlier in connection with the discussion about the thesis of convergence. They simply elevate the experiences of a single country to the status of a world historical yardstick. However, this position may be rejected while the notion of modernity as a common global condition may be retained.

Second, there is a position that focuses attention on the current array of cultural life forms and assigns each of them to a larger civilizational entity. These entities are seen to compose what almost amount to cultural tectonic plates that move and, sometimes violently, impinge upon each other, but rarely merge or blend into each other. At least since Toynbee, there has been what might constitute a kind of tradition in international-relations research that is based on a view of this type. Sometimes, as in the case of Toynbee and his followers, this view served as a basis of a plea for understanding, even respecting, a multiplicity of cultural forms. In other cases, the inferences have tended to be more hard-nosed, cautioning against allegedly naive hopes that "the others" might come to embrace the same "Western" values that the authors do.

To scholars, close to this or to analogous positions, it is natural to speak about a multiplicity of modernities. True enough, a set of technological, economic, and political institutions, with their origins in the context of Western Europe, have become diffused across the globe at least as ideals, sometimes also as working realities. These processes of diffusion and adaptation, however, do not at all mean that deep-seated cultural and cosmological differences between, say, Western Europe, China, and Japan are about to disappear. It only means that these different cultural entities have to adapt to and refer to a set of globally diffused ideas and practices. In their core identities, these societies remain characterized by the form they acquired during much earlier periods of cultural crystallization, whether these periods are located in the axial age or in the tenth to thirteenth centuries. These core identities have, of course, always in themselves been undergoing processes of change and reinterpretation, but they have continued to structure the most profound cosmological and societal assumptions of their civilizations, and it would be exceedingly naive to believe that they are now suddenly about to disappear.

I think this is a valid critique of different convergence theories. However, it is not a valid critique of the conception of modernity that I have tried to outline above. Modernity in this sense is not so much a new unified civilization, global in its extensiveness, unparalleled in its intrusiveness and destructiveness. Rather, modernity is a set of promissory notes, i.e., a set of hopes and expectations that entail some minimal conditions of adequacy that may be demanded of macrosocietal institutions no matter how much these institutions may differ in other respects. In both cultural and institutional terms, modernity, from the very inception of its basic ideas in Europe, has been characterized by a high degree of variability in institutional forms and conceptual constructions. It has provided reference points that have become globally relevant and that have served as structuring principles behind
institutional projects on a worldwide scale. Thus, we may look upon modernity as an age when certain structuring principles have come to define a common global condition. The existence of this common global condition does not mean that members of any single cultural community are about to relinquish their ontological and cosmological assumptions, much less their traditional institutions. It means, however, that the continuous interpretation, reinterpretation, and transformation of those commitments and institutional structures cannot but take account of the commonality of the global condition of modernity. This basic characteristic of modernity has been an inherent feature even in the restricted context of the Western part of Europe. It is now a characteristic that is becoming apparent on a global scale.

MODERNITY AS A GLOBAL CONDITION

In all periods of fundamental cultural and institutional crystallization, a new sense of historical consciousness, a new sense of the place of the thinking and acting self, has emerged. Indeed, intense intellectual activities of a critical, historical, and reflexive nature are among the key defining features of periods of major cultural crystallization. This is true of the axial age in the middle of the first millennium B.C. [16] It is also true of the period of assessment and renaissance of cultural ecumenes in many parts of the world in the period from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. These latter developments were manifested in a range of phenomena, from the Carolinian and Ottonian Empire in Western Europe and in the Western caliphate of Umayyad Spain to those of neo-Confucianism. Similarly, it is true of the cultural constitution of modernity in the European context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. [17]

In all these other periods, such reflection has had the physical limits of personal finite existence as one of its foci, but in generalizable form it also brought out a discourse on ways to bridge the chasm between the mundane and the transcendental order. Consciousness of the existence of such a chasm was in all cases also linked to consciousness about institutional practices that might serve to transcend that chasm. The discourse about such transcendence might be religious and philosophical, as in the axial age, or ecclesiastically ecumenical, as in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe. In the formation of modernity in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, philosophical reflection was, however, explicitly political.

For the first time in world history, such critical reflexivity about fundamental matters located the public and political sphere, rather than, say, a religious or ecclesiastical sphere, as the locale necessary for transcendental reflection to be institutionally efficacious in manifesting an idea of ethical life.

However, it is important to see that already in this respect, there were dramatic differences between different European societies. Thus, in a number of countries, and France is maybe the most noticeable case, the formation of a modern political order involved a strongly anticlerical stance. In some periods, this anticlericalism involved not only a rejection of the chasm between a mundane and a transcendental realm; it involved a transposition of the linearity of a temporal conception in the transcendental sphere to the mundane sphere.

Endowing political order with a millenarian telos has sometimes been described as Jacobinism, signaling the origins of totalitarian democracy, to paraphrase the title of J. L. Talmon's famous book. [18] However, it may also be described as the continuation of a medieval tradition of millenarian, not to say Gnostic, thought. As a consequence of such thought, the telos of political order becomes that of serving as a tool for the forces of light in an inescapable and uncompromising struggle against the forces of darkness and evil.

However, in many parts of Europe, neither an antireligious stance nor a Jacobin-Gnostic one was ever very prominent. This clearly goes for Britain. In the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and Prussia, a widely diffused and state-supported Protestant ethic, sometimes of a pietistic nature, had in the
seventeenth century served to bolster not so much the spirit of capitalism as the spirit of the early modern territorial state. In these countries such religious sentiments remained a vital force in societal life. In Prussia and some other German states, this ethic tended to be linked to a notion of service to royal prerogative, if in a state greatly reformed in the early nineteenth century. In Scandinavia, on the other hand, reform and opposition movements sprang up from within the Lutheran state churches and sometimes also manifested themselves in the formation of Protestant sects and so-called Free Churches. In many cases, they came to form a backbone of democratic opposition to royal power in the course of the nineteenth century.

Thus, it would be deeply misleading to describe the formation of modernity as involving a uniform process of secularization. Rather, it meant that a previous chasm between a mundane and a transcendental sphere came to be differentially reinterpreted in different European societies.

The formation of modernity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is the first major period of cultural crystallization when transformations in different parts of the world are directly interconnected. For other epochal transformations, in particular those associated with the concept of the so-called axial age in the middle of the first millennium B.C. and the profound transformations in many parts of the world in the tenth to thirteenth centuries, there are striking temporal co-occurrences. However, in the first case there are no demonstrable linkages to account for developments of an apparently similar nature in different parts of the world. In the second case, some hypotheses about historical connectedness have been proposed, but they remain suggestive rather than substantiated.

In the formation of modernity, a series of developments came together and jointly constituted a crystallization of a new type of societal order. This occurred in the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but it was not limited in its consequences to this specific context. It had direct and immediate repercussions for events and civilizations across the globe. Of course, discourses about language, history, agency, and societal institutions at the turn of the eighteenth century involved contesting positions.

There were, as already emphasized, wide differences not only between proponents and adversaries of political reform, but between the advocates of different philosophical schools, and there were significantly different intellectual and institutional traditions in different European countries. Thus, there was never one single homogenous conception of modernity. There was never homogeneity of societal institutions, even in the most restricted European setting. There was, from the very origins of modern societal institutions, an empirically undeniable and easily observable variety of institutional and cultural forms, even in the context of Western and Central Europe. This became even more obvious once the institutional projects that had been originally conceptualized in Europe were spread to other regions of the world. This multiformity means that we may still speak of a variety of different civilizations in the sense that origins of institutions and roots of cosmological thinking are highly different in different parts of the world. There is no reason to assume that all these differences will just fade away and be replaced by an encompassing, worldwide civilization. However, modernity is a global condition that now affects all our actions, interpretations, and habits, across nations and irrespective of which civilizational roots we may have or lay claim to. In this sense, it is a common condition on a global scale that we live in and with, engage in dialogue about, and that we have to reach out to grasp.

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ENDNOTES

(1.) The distinction between temporal and substantive conceptions of modernity is taken from Bernard Yack, The Fetishism of Modernities: Epochal Self-Consciousness in Contemporary Social and Political Thought (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998). While I share Yack's basic epistemological critique, I disagree with his argument that it is not possible and meaningful to analyze modernity as the conjunction of a set of societal and cultural transformations.

(2.) This theme was explored in the Summer 1998 issue of Daedalus on "Early Modernities."


(6.) Manent, An Intellectual History of Liberalism, 82.


(9.) Ibid., 6.


(14.) I am grateful to Professor Ion Ianosi in Bucharest for pointing this out to me in a conversation during the time in 1996-1997 when we were both Fellows of the Collegium Budapest.

