Europe in World Regional Perspective: Formations of Modernity and Major Historical Transformations

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Abstract

The paper seeks to present a world regional approach to the analysis of modernity and in doing so it also aims to make a contribution to comparative sociology and social theory. It is argued that world regions are the most suitable entry-point for comparing different socio-political constellations of our time, preferable to continents, civilizations and nation-states. However, a world regional foundation on its own is insufficient, due to the internal plurality and historically changing forms of world regions, and therefore needs to be accompanied by a concept that provides some degree of coherence within world regions and a tool for comparison with other world regions. The notion of modernity offers this level of generality while at the same time allowing for variety in its historical forms. Six main formations of modernity are identified, of which the European model was the first one and often a cultural reference for many other parts of the world. The thesis is that in the present day the most important developments are in the Asian and Latin American varieties, which unlike Europe are witnessing major historical transformation. Decisive in all of this is the question of democratization in the shaping of social imaginaries. Beginning with the problem of how to define the specificity of Europe, the paper provides an exploratory analysis of some of the salient considerations around a number of world regions, their formations of modernity, and the extent of major historical transformations in their present constitution.

Keywords: Africa, Asia, civilizations, Europe, Latin America, modernity, world regions

In recent years there has been increased attention given to the reality of Europe as not just a political entity, a polity, as represented, for instance, by the European Union, but as a social and cultural constellation whose reality transcends the sum of its parts as well as its internal divisions; in other words, it is more than a term to refer to a set of nation-states.¹ The notion of a history of Europe that is more than a history of European nations has been the subject of
increased scholarly attention, but without any clear conclusions emerging, as historians are generally reluctant to infer any general conclusions or engage in macro-level theorizing. Any such account of the singularity of Europe as an object of study is faced with the rather basic question as to the nature of the object. Since the object is not somehow historically pre-defined and given, but is formed in a long-run process of historical transformation, such questions are very difficult to answer if teleological and reductionist accounts are avoided. The shape of Europe was not set at some point in early history and the form it now takes was never predetermined. At what point in history do we take consciousness of the object to define the broad parameters of the object under investigation? Or, are we simply projecting back onto history constructions of a later origin and thus falling into the chronocentric fallacy of over-privileging our time? As an object of consciousness, Europe did not exist in any meaningful sense until the sixteenth century, but yet we speak of the history of Europe going back at least a thousand years earlier. The notion of Europe therefore presupposes a degree of continuity in history and congruence in terms of its cultural, social and political forms. Only by making such assumptions, which are empirically grounded, is it possible to theoretically constitute Europe as an objective phenomenon. Such processes of continuity and unity have to be furthermore manifest in forms of consciousness or discourses that actualize them and which constitute long-term cultural forms. The idea of Europe or the notion of a European identity is one such cultural form that has had varying degrees of strength. However, Europe is more than a discursive construction that can be related to ‘the idea of Europe’, it is also a societal formation in terms of economy, state and social structures and related to subject formation in terms of identity and consciousness.

The approach that I believe needs to be taken should address the discursive level by which an object becomes constructed in forms of consciousness, but it is also necessary to relate this cultural level of analysis to the formation of societal structures that give relative continuity and unity. One way to go about this is to take the framework of modernity as the context in which to view the making of Europe. In section 2 a short outline of what modernity entails will be provided, but for present purposes it can be noted that it entails a societal configuration of state, economy and society relations that is shaped by a cognitive model and a mode of knowledge that makes possible the self-constitution of the object through reference to a range of ideas that are characteristically modern. A defining feature of modernity is a social imaginary that seeks the transformation of the present by human agency. There is a huge variability in the forms that modern societies take, but it is possible to specify what is distinctive about Europe in terms of the formation of modernity which had long-lasting societal consequences.

There are essentially two ways of addressing the question of the specificity of Europe. One way is to look at the endogenous formation of Europe out of its constituent parts and the other way is to locate Europe in a wider global context. The first approach to the question will be given in Section 3. However, a fuller account will require an external perspective beyond Europe. This, then, is the contribution of the present paper, namely to explore what can be said about the nature of European modernity when viewed in a transnational
perspective as a world region. This will be tentatively attempted in Sections 4. One approach to this question is simply to examine the range of external influences on Europe, and thus to correct a purely internalist or endogenous account of the rise of Europe. However, by placing Europe in a global context I understand something more far-reaching than simply accounting for the impact of exogenous influences, important as this is for a full account of the making of Europe. The transnational perspective on modernity offered here is an attempt to illuminate what is distinctive about a particular formation of modernity, such as the European one, and making a contribution to what Wagner has termed a ‘global sociology of the present’ (see Wagner 2012, 2014) as well as more generally to comparative sociology and social theory.

This paper thus seeks to answer a very big question and, to paraphrase Charles Tilly (1984), will make some huge comparisons. The paper is concerned with Europe viewed in global context. This however raises the question of defining the spatial and temporal reference points and establishing congruence between both, such that the term Europe is a sociologically meaningful category. My concern is with the formation of modernity in Europe, for as I will argue the defining features of Europe are characteristics of modernity, as opposed to other attributes, such as nations or states, continents, civilizations or the notion of the West and that European modernity is best seen in terms of a transnational comparison of formations of modernity.

**Problems in defining Europe**

The proposal for an analysis of Europe from a transnational perspective while attractive on a theoretical level is fraught with methodological difficulties. The challenges in many ways relate to problems of comparative analysis and issues of Eurocentrism, quite apart from the immense difficulty of any kind of a global analysis. Comparative analysis that assumes national societies as coherent wholes has been much undermined by developments relating to the impact of globalization and cosmopolitan conceptions of societies as inter-related and heterogeneous (see Haupt and Kocka 2009). One of the main difficulties lies in specifying the referents, which in this case are Europe and its world comparators. This immediately raises the question of what are the units of analysis that correspond to Europe and whether the differences are too great to be comparable. Obviously this also requires clarity on what we mean by Europe in broad geopolitical and historical terms as a bounded entity when it comes to global contextualization. My analysis, informed by the above brief account of the distinctive features of Europe, thus begins with a discussion on what is missing in existing approaches in the human and social sciences to the definition of the specificity of Europe.

The traditional approach is to regard Europe as a continent and thus comparable units are other continents. Continents have now been much criticized as viable units of analysis (see Lewis and Wigen 1997). It also gives too much explanatory weight to geography. Continents are artificial constructions and have had highly variable histories. The idea of Europe, while often associated with a continent or subcontinent, has long ceased to have a continental
meaning. The notion of a continent is considerably more problematic when it comes to other parts of the world, Africa and Asia given their size and diversity. The notion of Asia is particularly a problem in that the term is largely a western invention and not normally used by the Chinese or Japanese and has not been central to India. It is difficult to place such vastly different societies as Iran and Japan in the same category. The problem with Africa as a continent also presents significant problems, given the huge historical and geographical difference between sub-Saharan and the Arabic speaking regions to the north, the divide between the Christian and Islamic states, and the fact that in a formative period of European history the Mediterranean Sea united northern Africa and much of southern Europe. The notion of separate continents was a product of the divergence of those regions that Braudel once saw as constituting the unity of the Mediterranean world. More generally the notion of continents fails to address one of the key insights that emerged out of global history approaches over the past two decades or so, namely a vision of the world as inter-connected than as separate. There are now numerous studies that demonstrate not only inter-connections arising from global influences, but the existence of entire maritime regions, such as the Indian Ocean, Micronesia and the Pacific Rim, the Atlantic World (see for example, Benjamin 2009; Fawaz and Bayly 2001). There is the additional problem of defining a continent in the first instance, as the case of Europe itself illustrates, since there are no natural geographical criteria that distinguish what has often been called the western peninsula of Asia or where the internal borders of Eurasia lie. Historians will continue to debate the question of the unity of the history of Africa, for instance, or the unity of European history, but the idea of a geographical continent plays little importance in such arguments. Its shadow, however, remains in that such terms remarkably continue to persist as meta-spatial terms signifying a civilizational unity that transcends diversity. It is ultimately a testimony to the poverty of theory that when all else fails, geography fulfils the function of a definition, but one that presupposes other definitions and begs further questions.

An alternative but related notion to continents is the concept of civilization. The old-fashioned nineteenth century notion of western civilization as a universal model that comes to replace all world civilizations has been for long discarded. Since the work of S. N. Eisenstadt and more recently Johann Arnason (2003), the rise of civilizational analysis has put civilizations back on the map in ways that overcome the discredited ideological associations of the older notion of civilization as a singular entity, for civilizational analysis is concerned with the plurality of civilizations and does not operate with a hierarchy of civilizations. Moreover, civilizations in this view are not underpinned by geographical parameters such as continents. A detailed analysis of civilizational analysis cannot be provided here, but it can be noted that the advantages and disadvantages include the following. The concern with multiple civilizations and the related notion of multiple forms of modernity emphasizes pluralization in contrast to the concern with universality in the classical approaches to modernization; it offers a perspective that is wider than nations and while capturing tendencies towards pluralization it does not over-pluralize global analysis; it places a strong emphasis on the encounters of civilizations and thus avoids a view of the world based on separate cultures or a unitary and homogenous view of the world shaped by a single developmental logic such as
westernization. On the negative side, it somewhat down plays world areas that cannot be so easily explained in terms of civilizations, by which is generally meant the Eurasian civilizations. A weakness of civilizational analysis is that the units in question tend to be cultures formed from the major world religions and as a consequence the approach is weak in accounting for modernity, which is not necessarily tied to a civilizational origin. While a civilizational perspective does provide a partial account of long-run historical analysis, it cannot fully account for the major attributes of Europe and it is limited in addressing current issues and developments. Europe is certainly in part a civilization, albeit one that is best understood as a constellation of civilizations, for it was never entirely shaped by one civilization but many (see Delanty 2013). The recognition of a plurality of inter-acting civilizations is undoubtedly a step in the right direction in terms of a long-term formative account of the origins and rise of Europe, but it is insufficient in accounting for some of the key features of modern Europe, such as those described above.

Replacing civilizations with nation-states is obviously one way out of this problem of larger scale units such as continents or civilizations. This is clearly implicit in the approach of much of historical analysis, as in the work of Michael Mann, for instance, or in mainstream histories of Europe. A key problem in any global contextualization of Europe is that a comparison based on nation-states will not necessarily tell us much that is interesting about Europe, which is more than the sum of its constituent parts. Since there are about 196 countries — 192 UN member states — in the world, a global sociological approach will need a unit of analysis that is greater than nation-states but smaller that the world itself. The 27 nation-states that make up the present European Union are themselves of greatly varying size making comparison difficult and of little benefit when it comes to accounting for the specificity of Europe as a reality in itself. While many nation-states outside the European context are very large and for many purposes (see Wagner 2012) are useful comparators — Brazil, China, India, Russia, the USA — when it comes to issues relating to demography, economic development, political regulation, the fact remains that Europe is not a nation-state despite the growing political importance of the European Union.

A global analysis that goes beyond a superficial account of socio-economic and inter-state issues will have to address civilizational questions and offer a long-run historical perspective, but it will also have to address major historical transformations in modern society and which are not simply civilizational in terms of path dependent processes that began with the Axial Age, the reference point for much of civilizational theory. In view of the limits of nations, civilizations and continents what then is the alternative? An alternative proposal is to see Europe as a world region comparable, therefore, to other world regions. The argument advanced here is that a world regional approach offers a potentially more fruitful basis for global analysis than a country specific approach or one based on continents. This can be defended only in brief outline here.

World regions by definition are larger than nations and while having a civilizational dimension, they are neither reducible to nations nor to a single civilization. A unit of measurement is needed that is more than a country, but smaller than the globe itself. In short,
world regions appear to fulfil this criterion. To be sure, most world regions are heavily influenced by particular nation-states, but they are not entirely shaped by them. Indeed, in many cases nation-states were relatively late developments, especially in Asia and in Africa. As has often been noted, for much of history most peoples lived within empires not nation-states (see Burbank and Cooper 2010). The imperial model, as best illustrated by Brazil following independence, was often the preferred model for statehood and others that did not formally adopt it did so in practice, as the example of the USA reveals in the expansionist ambitions of the thirteen colonies (Mota 2014). Where traditional approaches looked at the world in terms of homogenous units, generally continentally defined civilizations, a world regions approach is arguably more attuned to a heterogeneous view of the world. World regions are heterogeneous in a number of ways. World regions are unavoidably overlapping and thus correct one of the chief failures of the traditional view of the world as composed of separate units that interact, but are not formed in any significant way from the interactions. Moreover, world regions are not necessarily defined by a conception of global space in terms of centres and peripheries. Indeed, specific world regions are more meaningful units in which to see centre and periphery relations at work. In the allegedly post-hegemonic world of contemporary global politics in which a plurality of global centres of power has consolidated, the notion of world regions is all the more relevant. A world regions approach is also a much needed corrective to dichotomous conceptions of East versus West, North versus South or northern hemisphere constructions of the West. It thus offers an alternative to Eurocentric conceptions of the world and approaches to history that take the history of Europe and North America as the universal reference points. It may also be suggested that consciousness of, and contestation about, world regions is now a significant part of the self-understanding of many countries as they re-position themselves and re-define their identities in a world of changing borders. As part of a wider region, nation-states too are defining themselves in ways that include the reality of interconnections and shared trajectories as well as reinterpretations of the past. The increasing importance of transnational regional organizations undoubtedly also plays a role in shaping such macro-regional ideas. It is inevitably the case that this will be highly varied, with some regions having stronger identities than others.

However, despite these advantages a world region approach is not without problems when it comes to comparative historical sociological analysis. Many if not all regions changed their shape in history and several of what are today considered world regions are contemporary constructions and are contested. The result is that there is no clear consensus on the defining attributes of many world regions, which are often constructed according to the requirements of the area of interest (health, security, demography). While they are numerically greater than civilizations they are composed in many cases of very large and diverse countries, to a point that their usefulness may be questioned (see Anderson 1998). This is especially in the case with regard to Asia, with numerous overlapping regions as in the Middle East and in the multiple ways Africa and Asia overlap. A problematical example is Turkey, which in historical terms cannot be separated from the Ottoman legacy, but the region that this constituted does not exist as a world region today. Another contemporary example of how
volatile regions are is the conflict in the Ukraine around its geopolitical position within the Russian or European regional constellation.

In conclusion, the geographical notion of world regions is useful, but in need of modification for the purpose of a sociological global analysis if the temptation of chronocentrism — taking the spatial constellations of the present — as timeless. Undoubtedly fruitful results can be obtained from an analysis based on existing models and relatively short time-spans. As largely geopolitical configurations world regions are of limited use when it comes to long-run historical analysis since world regions are not necessarily world historical regions. This is due in part to the difference between present and past world regions, but also due to the internal differences within many world regions. The concept has been much influenced by a geographical conception of historical space and by the dictates of largely western science in its need for an area studies categorization of the world. For this reason I argue that a more temporal and long-run sociological approach needs to incorporate a focus on major historical transformations based on particular formations of modernity in order to account for the historically changing forms of world regions and comparisons between them. The notion of modernity offers this level of generality while at the same time allowing for variety in its historical forms. In the next step this will be explored around the notion of formations of modernity and then illustrated with respect to Europe.

**Modernity as a framework**

The concept of modernity has come to mean both a particular condition defined by certain ideas and consciousness, on the one side, and on the other, the institutional matrixes of modern society. It thus captures both the philosophical and the sociological dimensions of the term as it has come to be used in a broad range of scholarship in the human and social sciences in recent years, complementing, if not replacing, notions of modernization. The approach put forwarded here is influenced by the notion of ‘multiple modernities’ as originally advanced by Eisenstadt (2000, 2003) as a theory addressed to the global diffusion of modernity and the recognition of its diverse cultural and political forms. A key insight emerging from his work and those who followed him is that there is not a singular western or European modernity that is transplanted to the rest of the world but a multiplicity of different forms. However I avoid the problem that besets the multiple modernity paradigm of an over-pluralization of modernity by which every nation-state embodies a different modernity. In this view, modernity is not a numerical condition as such, but a future oriented condition in which societies seek to transform themselves in light of certain ideas that have come to be defined as modern. Additionally, Eisenstadt’s multiple modernities framework is limited by an over-emphasis on what he called ‘cultural programmes’ that supposedly derive from the civilizations of the axial age and in which the European variant that later crystallized is given too much weight in shaping other world varieties of modernity.

The proposal made in this paper here is to define modernity, firstly, as a condition that is constituted by certain ideas or principles that form the basis of, what I term following
Strydom (2011), its cognitive model, which influences the shape of the cultural models and societal forms of modernity. These ideas, or ideas of reason, can be variously described as freedom, liberty, autonomy, collective and individual self-determination, equality. Such ideas make possible, following Castoriadis (1987) and Taylor (2004), a ‘social imaginary’, a self-projection of society, a way of imagining future possibilities. Secondly, the nature of these ideas is that they provide a basis for challenging power. Modern societies are thus characterized by contestation on the basis of these ideas, which form the structuring content of their cognitive model and provide them with an epistemic structure or mode of knowledge. The nature of these ideas is that they are regulative and reflective in offering modes of thinking, ways of viewing the world, a grammar of principles, a social imaginary etc. They embody in addition to the cognitive level, normative, and aesthetic components. Unlike religious systems, modernity does not provide ready-made answers to fundamental questions, but only reference points and a lens through which the world is seen. Modernity entails a consciousness of being modern and of a condition that needs to be realized in social forms. A feature of modernity is that these ideas that give it form do not dictate how they should be realized. The cognitive model of modernity is therefore more akin to a set of reference points that require interpretation in concrete historical situations and are thus actualized in specific cultural models and societal forms. Consequently there is no single or universal logic that modernity takes since the guiding ideas of modernity need to be interpreted and it is inevitable that they will be differently interpreted in different places and in different times. It is this condition that gives rise to a plurality of cultural models and societal forms of modernity. Moreover, all interpretations are essentially contested. Above all, modernity is a transformative project based on a social imaginary that seeks to create a new kind of society: social and political order is based on a vision of the future rather than the past, which is consequently re-interpreted in light of the demands of the present. There is a strong emphasis in it on the capacity of human agency to transform the world. This is what gives to the condition of modernity a basis for major historical transformations in the social and political constitution of society.

The form that modern society takes can thus be seen as the result of specific interpretations of the regulative ideas. In many cases this will entail a combination of ideas, such as freedom and autonomy or freedom and equality. The most influential cultural and political movements in modern society, such as romanticism, socialism, conservatism, republicanism, liberalism, etc. have all derived from different combinations of these key ideas, to which we can now add freedom and religion. A feature of all these movements was their continuous transformation in light of contestation over their defining ideas. Thus nationalism was variously shaped by the diverse syntheses of romanticism, liberalism and republicanism.

This is not to say that modernity is entirely open in terms of its consciousness, though it can be argued in line with a postmodern perspective, that modernity has become increasingly uncertain in its orientation. However, a feature of modernity is the pursuit of knowledge, in particular scientific knowledge and the belief that truth can be established by the appropriate application of knowledge. Modern societies can thus be viewed as knowledge based in that
knowledge is a prerequisite for many purposes, whether economic or political or cultural. Indeed, modern societies know themselves to be modern and this in itself is an instance of knowledge as constitutive of the social order of modernity. With modernity, knowledge is central in both the interpretation of the ideas on which modernity is based and in the application of those ideas to social institutions, for modern society like all societies need to solve the problem posed by the objective facts of scarcity of resources and human needs.

Modernity is then more than a condition characterized by ideas and knowledge; it is also a societal condition in which institutional arrangements are worked out in ways that reflect the cultural model. The societal model, or social formation, of modernity can be viewed in terms of specific configurations of state formation, capitalism, and the organization of social relations. The form it takes varies according to how the relation between these is worked out in specific historical transformations. There is no universal form, such as presupposed in the older theories of modernization and while one particular form may be adopted by other societies there will inevitably be differences, in particular in relation to the cultural model. It can also be hypothesized that there may also be rival projects of modernity within a given society. Viewed in such terms, modernity, while being based on a number of key impulses that give to it a certain singularity, takes a variety of different forms. Whether or not due to processes of globalization there is greater homogeneity in modernity throughout the world is not easily answered, but it can be said that if there is a convergence it is not necessarily due to the condition of modernity itself or to ‘westernization’ or ‘Americanization.’ The overwhelming empirical evidence points in the direction of considerable global variability in modernity (see, for example, Inglehart and Norris 2009; Robertson 1992). In the longer perspective of history, it is undoubtedly the case that at different periods various western powers were disproportionally influential as colonizing agents. However, in such cases the outcome has rarely been the whole-scale transplantation of one model of modernity into another setting, but its widespread appropriation leading in many cases to hybrid formations, if not ones antithetical to European modernity (Mota and Delanty 2015). It can be further hypothesized that the outcome is less a clash of civilizations than a conflict between different formations of modernity.

This approach, I argue, is preferable to Beck’s notion of a ‘second modernity’ that has civilizational variants, such as an ‘Asian Modernity’, the subject of recent studies (see Beck and Grande 2010). The problem with such a perspective is that it presupposes, despite its intention, a basic western notion of modernity as a historical phase and a variety of projects of second modernity that have emerged as a reaction. This places too much emphasis on the present as a reaction to the past and that only in the present ‘second modernity’ can tradition become reflective. It also operates with an over-general notion of an Asian modernity, though paradoxically the applications are country specific, as Calhoun (2010) has noted in a critical assessment. However, one important point has emerged out of Beck’s proposals, namely a strong sense of modernity as entailing a major historical transformation in which reflexivity is central, and in particular reflexivity of risks in a more transnationalized world. While his approach compartmentalizes such shifts into an epochal rupture brought about by a second
modernity, the sense of a major historical transformation occurring in the present captures an important aspect of the condition of modernity today.

One final point needs to be addressed, namely how the ideas of reason that give modernity its basic animus get embodied in concrete social forms and institutional arrangements. In other words, it must be demonstrated how the cultural model of modernity is linked with the societal model of modernity. This is a weakness in current theorizing on modernity, which tends to be strongly cultural or interpretative to the neglect of the institutional dimensions and historical formations. A key feature of modernity is its transformational nature: modernity is a condition of on-going societal transformation in which major historical transformations are generated from new interpretations of the cognitive reference points of modernity. The dynamics that make this possible are primarily the projects of social agents. The condition of modernity is one in which social agents generate new conceptions of society that take on a transformational force to become the basis of new social realities. Thus revolutions and responses to crises are very much a feature of modernity, which is most strongly felt where there is consciousness of major historical events in which the present is re-shaped in the image of a possible future. The logic of modernity can thus be described as one of the generation of new ideas at times of major change or crisis, such as the re-interpretation of the present in its relation to the past, the selection from the variety of new projects leading to societal transformation and, finally, the institutionalization of the new ideas.

This approach is particularly fruitful when it comes to large-scale units such as Europe since it offers a broader context to make sense of its constitutive features. These are not only civilizational or geopolitical, but reside in the nature of modernity and in, what Sewell (2005) has termed, ‘logics of history’ by which structures are transformed by social actors in light of new interpretations of the world. So, to identify specific formations of modernity, it is suggested that attention must be given to the ways in which social actors bring about major re-orientations in the cultural and societal models of societies. While these will be different, it is inevitable due to globalization that there will be considerable diffusion and mutual influence in the different trajectories of modern societies. However, significant explanatory power can be attributed to the various formations of modernity.

The formation of European modernity

On the basis of the foregoing the elements of the European variant of modernity can now be outlined in a tentative manner. These are the structures of modernity in Europe and do not define the nature of modernity more generally, which is geographically and historically variable. European modernity is only one of many forms. It may be the case that the characteristic features of modernity first appeared in Europe, but this does not make them European per se. The ideas of freedom, liberty, autonomy, equality, justice, etc were taken up by various groups in Europe especially since the seventeenth century and came to reflect the general consciousness of modernity by the nineteenth century. They were counter-factual ideas that were generally articulated by oppositional social groups and movements against the
status quo. As the history of the liberal idea attests, there were profoundly different interpretations of its implications for the design of society. The history of socialism shows that there were major conflicts between the liberal emphasis on rights and the idea of social justice. The example of nationalism, which is animated by the notion of collective self-determination, illustrates the tendency towards conflict in modernity around different cultural models.

It is thus possible to see modernity in Europe as a process of cultural and political transformation in which new ideas emerge and are taken up by different social groups producing new interpretations of the social world. This occurred relatively early in Europe but this does not mean that it was a specifically European development. However, the nature of urbanization, the consolidation of civil society, and state formation meant that radical ideas received early institutionalization. As Weber’s analysis of Christianity suggests, it is possible that the nature of Christianity in part facilitated the emergence of modernity; indeed, as has often been noted, the idea of the modern was itself first articulated by the early Church in order to distinguish the Christian era from pagan antiquity. A significant factor was that since the Investiture controversy the church never fully dominated the state. Later developments within Latin Christianity, from the Reformation onwards, were highly conducive to the spirit of modernity in promoting individualism, the work ethic, and scientific inquiry. Counter-Reformation Catholicism also underwent a parallel transformation in light of the encounter with modernity. The internal doctrinal contestation within Christianity, which weakened its political influence, created a space for other forms of critique. In this way, then, it can be hypothesized that modernity in Europe, more than in other parts of the world, emerged out of the fragmentation of its civilizational worldview in so far as this was predominantly shaped by Christianity.\textsuperscript{vii}

A defining feature of European modernity, to make a general assumption, is that the relation between state, capitalism and civil society evolved such that neither the state nor capitalism dominated each other; the power of political and economic elites was mediated by organized interests and social movements or civil society. The relative strength of civil society in Europe played a formative role in the making of modernity, but too the contest between the state and the rising market society was also significant. This had its origins in feudalism, which was a political and social order that bound serf and master in relations of obligation. The rise of the centralized state since late medieval times had to meet the demands of organized guilds and non-state organizations which checked the growth of absolutism (Ertman 1997). In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries various groups succeeded in winning liberties from central authority and created, what Scücs (1988: 306) has referred to as, a ‘plurality of small freedoms’. Modernity in Europe was shaped by the interactions of different interest groups, the clergy, the nobles and merchants who resisted the attempts of royal authority towards centralization, but they also had to reach compromises between themselves. These of course were the liberties of the elites, but other groups also benefited from such early attempts to limit royal power. The result of this tendency whereby elites had to negotiate power locally was the emergence of representation and the limiting of
centralization through increased autonomy for factional interests. It can thus be hypothesized that this all had a democratizing outcome in terms of long-term effects. However, such contestation was not only within the elites, for by the early modern period there was a well-established popular and largely urban tradition of revolt and dissent. The embryonic form of modernity lay in the establishment of statutory rights for different social groups, principally organized workers (see Offe 2003). Polanyi’s account of the ‘great transformation’ that saw the rise of market society with its ‘disembedding’ effects and countervailing currents for social protection is another way to see this aspect of modernity as a ‘double movement’ in which power meets with social challenges (Polanyi [1944] 2001).

The rise of capitalism occurred within a societal context of a state structure that had been domesticated by civil society as a result of successful popular and elite revolts. The resulting societal model that emerged out of the European route to modernity can be described as one than gave a central place to civil society, which in setting limits to central state power and in influencing the nature of political power determined that the rise of capitalism would be a conflict ridden one. In this view, one of the features of European modernity was then a strong concern with the politics of class, which had to compete with the politics of nationalism, and was arguably the dynamic force in the making of European modernity. Indeed, the success of nationalism had a lot to do with the formation of class based political movements and the need to incorporate the working class into the political community of the nation. The entire project of modernity in Europe was marked by a tension between the democratic spirit that was fostered by class politics and the development of capitalism. This gave rise to competing projects of modernity in the first half of the twentieth century, as represented by fascism, communism and liberal democracy. The outcome of the defeat of fascism in 1945 and the Cold War marginalization of communism in central and eastern Europe was, at least in western Europe, a tradition of democratic capitalism, that is a form of capitalism that was to varying degrees constrained by class politics and the democratic constitutional state. It can thus be argued that the legacy of European modernity has been in the traditions of solidarity and social justice that emerged from the history of social struggles. Despite the wide diversity of Europe, it is this legacy of modernity that lies at its core giving to it a certain identity or unity that is discernible in its many national and regional forms. This is not to say that these structures have always been the main drivers of social change, but it can be suggested that the major social and political transformations in Europe have been very much shaped by this legacy. The 1989 revolution in central and Eastern Europe and the project of European integration in part preserved some of this legacy, but with the crisis of that project in the present day it is possible to see the signs of a much greater crisis in the social imaginary that lay at the core of modernity. As a radically transformative project, European modernity lost its impetus by the early twentieth century when the First World War brought about a major division within Europe and the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 set the terms for a division that was to last until 1989, by which time modernity had been reduced to the project of the transnationalization of the European nation. By this time the project of modernity had become more central to other parts of the world which witnessed great experiments with democratization producing new and more transformative models of modernity.
In the final analysis, to make a general claim, the shape of European modernity has been characterized by the strong transformational capacity of social actors to set limits to the power of elites. The outcome has been major social and political transformations in the relation between state and economy leading to a plurality of centres of power than a single centre of power. The ancient civilizational heritage was consequently dissipated by modernity which brought into play a diverse range of cultural orientations and societal forces that made modern Europe a part of the world where consciousness of modernity was particularly powerful. The next section considers this view of the European formation of modernity in light of other formations.

**Comparative perspectives on formations of modernity**

It would be beyond the scope of a single paper to provide a comparative analysis of the forms of modernity that can be associated with the major world regions. However, some of the main considerations and examples can be indicated from the admittedly limited perspective of an attempt to contextualize Europe. To demonstrate the working of a world regional approach, I argue we can tentatively assume six major formations of modernity. In addition to European modernity, as discussed in the above, these are: New World modernities, Postcolonial modernities, Islamic modernities, Reactive modernities, and alternative modernities. This schema is in part suggested by Therborn’s (2003) four-fold characterization of ‘routes to and from modernity’, but offers a different conceptualization that gives a stronger emphasis to those formations of modernity that were largely shaped independently of Europe, such as Iran, Russia, China, to take some of the major examples of traditions based on endogenous imperial traditions rooted in non-European civilizations. In these latter cases a specific Islamic formation of modernity can be identified (quintessentially represented by Iran), alternative modernities that were generated largely from sources outside Europe (China and Russia), and reactive modernities, illustrated by Turkey and Japan, whose model of modernity was selectively borrowed from elements drawn from Europe. These different histories of empire and colonization were decisive in shaping the experience with modernity, which almost everywhere was contradictory, overlapping and uneven. European imperialism was a major force in both spreading modernity and in provoking alternative visions of modernity, but as Bayly (2004: 3) notes, decisive was that it was only partial and temporary, for there were many points of resistance. The following is a necessarily brief discussion of some of the salient aspects of some of these formations of modernity and the extent of major historical transformations in their present constitution.

New World modernities refer to the regions of the world that were originally settler societies founded by peoples of European descent. This includes America, Australia and New Zealand, and South Africa. Despite the considerable differences between all these societies, they all shared a trajectory based on a European origin, rebellion from that origin and the strong sense of what Louis Harz (1964) has described as the founding of a new society, which in some cases took on a messianic dimension. An initial contrast can be drawn between the USA,
where a distinctive model of modernity crystalized, and Europe. In terms of the cultural model of modernity the similarities are strong, with one notable exception. To cite Werner Sombart’s (1979) famous 1906 study, *Why there is no Socialism in the United States* the guiding ideas that emanated from the revolt of the Thirteen Colonies were those of freedom and both individual and collective self-determination. The European concern with social justice was relatively absent and the history of the USA was not shaped by a tradition of popular revolt based on the structure of rights that developed in both agrarian and urban settings in Europe. As a revolt from the European ancien régime, modernity was shaped from the beginning by a radical social imaginary that emerged from a foundational moment in which republican ideas mixed with Protestant reformism giving to the new society a future oriented redemptive spirit that was absent in Europe. Civil society, as de Tocqueville noted, was strong in the USA, but it was predominantly located in local communities and did not produce major social movements as was the case in Europe. The USA route to modernity led to the predominance of the market and ultimately a state form that was considerably more subservient to the market than was the case in Europe. The departure of ways between Europe and North America was on the relation with the market, both the relation of the state to the market and that of civil society. The broad trajectory of modernity in North America was then very different from Europe in both its cultural model and in its societal form which was not negotiated by the political left. This does not mean two different modernities confronting each other, for Europe since the 1920s was greatly influenced by Americanization and the New Deal helped to provide a social model for post-1945 western Europe and too for the formation of the project of European integration. But the lines of division were long drawn as the doctrine of ‘American exceptionalism’ (Lipset 1996) and the rise of North American neo-liberalism attest. For these reasons, despite the broad notion of the West, it is important to draw a distinction between European modernity and the variant that developed especially in the USA.

A consideration of European modernity with Latin America reveals a slightly different trajectory. As in North America the historical experience was shaped through liberation from the colonial powers of the old world, Spain and Portugal, large-scale immigration from late 19th century, but differed in that in many parts the outcome was one in which popular class based politics played a far greater role. Latin America was one of the first experiments with constitutionalism and the idea of social rights was considerably stronger than in the north. The abolition of slavery also occurred earlier than in the US and in the case of Bolivia it was prohibited from the early years of the republic in 1826. However, unlike in Europe the pattern of state formation led to a highly dependent model of neo-colonial capitalism that was almost entirely oriented around the needs of the northern hemisphere and of local elites (Galeano 1997 [1971]). The result was a weaker tradition of democratic capitalism. In the present day, as is best illustrated by Brazil since the Lula reforms and Venezuela in the Chavez years, the social agenda has been re-asserted with reforms addressing the problem of significant social inequality and political polarization (see also Therborn 2012). The relation between capitalism, the state and civil society is undergoing a major transformation in the direction of greater equality and a more inclusive democracy, though this is, with the exception of Brazil,
fragile. Yet it is possible to speak of a radicalized social imaginary re-defining political community towards greater democratization.

The strongest contrast in models of modernity is in Asia. For reasons of space only a few generalizations can be made. It is difficult to specify an over-arching Asian model of modernity as a meaningful category. Perhaps the most striking difference between European and Asian forms of modernity in general is the relative absence in Asia of a strong tradition of civil society. It is this that possibly explains the late development of democracy and forms of statehood that were not constrained by traditions of popular rebellion and revolt that was a formative feature of European modernity. The major exception in this regard was India which evolved a constitutional democracy by the middle of the twentieth century. State formation and imperial systems of rule in Russia and in East Asia, which were not subject to European colonialism, developed in entirely different directions and which were conducive neither to the formation of civil society nor, at least until very recently, to capitalism. These were predominantly state centred societies in which capitalism and more generally industrialization was spear-headed by the state. Today it is a different matter. Throughout Asia there are today major conflicts, both latent and overt, around issues that are largely of social inequality and demands for democratization. The rise of civil society has had a transformative impact on states that only partially democratized and which fostered unbridled and highly exploitative forms of capitalism, most vividly in China and in India. As in Latin America, class politics plays a huge role in negotiating the rapidly changing relation between capitalism and the state.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of North Africa, which shared a history of colonialism that was closer to that experienced in parts of Asia (on African modernity see Deutsch, Probst, Schmidt 2002; Thomas 2011). North Africa and the Middle East is today a less cohesive world region than in earlier times when the advent of modernity arrived in the late Ottoman world. In terms of formations of modernity, it is a hybrid world region shaped by both Ottoman and European colonialism and where Islamic forms of modernity can be found along with those that take a more overt post-colonial form. While European modernity emerged out of a fragmentation of its civilizational antecedents and the marginalization of religion, the advent of modernity occurred more directly through religion. Since the ‘Arab Spring’ the region has witnessed a social and political transformation in the model of modernity that has so far prevailed. It is possible to see in this the assertion of a new social imaginary that has so far transformed the cultural model of the region. It is not yet possible to see the consequences for societal formation. However, it is possible everywhere to see the transformative impact of social movements, at least as potential sources of social change (see Castells 2012; Therborn 2014). In India social protest against the Special Economic Zones and in China worker demands for rights as well as since 2011 pro-democracy protests inspired by the developments in the Arab world are potentially far-reaching in defining the relation between capitalism and democracy and in setting the terms for radical change (see also Witsoe 2013). South Africa since 1994 is also another pertinent example of variant of
modernity that is in the present marked by a strong transformational project. In contrast, in North America and in Europe there are few signs of major political transformation.

Conclusion

Europe was the location where modernity in the most discernible sense of the term first developed. This assumption does not mean that modernity is European or that its subsequent forms would follow the European route. It was inevitable that the form in which modernity unfolded in Europe would be a reference point for other parts of the world and in many ways European modernity was a catalyst for later forms of modernity in the rest of the world, which were considerably amplified by Europe. In both the former colonies of the European powers and elsewhere modernity developed according to different civilizational and regional logics. It is arguably the case that the most far-reaching experiments in the twenty-first century are in the non-western world, especially in Asia and in Latin America. While the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent break-up of the Warsaw Pact countries were momentous events, in particular as they coincided with the enlargement of the now crisis-stricken EU, the basic form of European modernity did not greatly change. The major social movements that shaped it have largely vanished, leaving only their consequences. Whether or not Europe undergoes major societal change remains to be seen, but there is not much to indicate — notwithstanding the Eurozone crisis — a continued transformation in state and society. It is a different matter in other parts of the world where the transformative impact of the ideas of modernity are being felt and where a new wave of popular social movements is emerging, leading in many cases to the transformation of the state. This world-wide wave of democratization may certainly be seen as a kind of catching-up on the western world as far as democracy and social justice is concerned, in much the same way as the civil society movements in central and eastern Europe led to the collapse of state socialism. However, that would be too simple in that the nature and dynamics of these popular movements is different and the outcomes will also take different forms, which are not un-related to very different demographic contexts and civilizational legacies. The Chinese experiment with modernity – capitalism without representative democracy – the growing confluence of capitalism and democracy in many parts of the Muslim world, strong socialist tendencies in Latin America, are three examples of far-reaching societal change. A feature of the global context, is the predominance, especially in China and India, of state capitalism. In many of the leading economies, such as the BRICS (if South Africa is included) group, large sectors of the economy are owned by the state and others are state managed, suggesting a contrast between western market capitalism and diverse forms of state capitalism. Both of these models, for entirely different reasons, are in crisis today, setting the terms for new conflicts and for new institutional possibilities.

Perhaps one of the most far-reaching implications of the new wave of democratization beyond Europe and North America will be a transformation in global politics. As the rest of the world undergoes democratization and new forms of state regulation emerge, the current balance of power will inevitably shift, posing new challenges for Europe. For instance, Europe is heavily dependent on Asian countries for its energy; if nothing changes, 70 per cent
of gas and electricity will be imported, mostly from Russia and the Middle East. To take a different example, China is increasingly interested in the EU as an alternative global player to the USA and China is dependent on trade with EU, which is its largest trading partner (and China is the EU largest overseas market). The alternative, which is less attractive, for China is to be more dependent on trade with the USA. This does not mean there will a global economic shift from west to east, as in somewhat extreme thesis of Frank (1998) and a consequent European decline. The future is likely to be one in which the European model of modernity will have to accommodate the demands, both political and economic, of other rapidly developing parts of the world, but it is also in a strong position in its global standing, ironically due to the desire of the Chinese Community Party to preserve capitalism domestically and internationally. In this multi-polar and post-western age, Europe will have considerably less to offer the world. The reference points for modernity will increasingly be less defined by the European historical experience. One of the major questions will be whether this means the world-wide dominance of the market or whether democracy will develop in innovative ways in the rest of the world. While many parts of the world, in particular in Latin America and Asia, are discovering possible futures, Europe has only its past to look to.

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Notes

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2 This has been the subject of several studies since Pomeranz’s (2000) ground-breaking work; for example, Bayly (2004), Halperin (2008), Hobson (2004), Osterhammel (2014).
\[\text{iii}\] For a discussion on developments in comparative historical sociology, see Adams, Clemens, Orloff (2005).

\[\text{iv}\] I am partly following the argument on world regions set out by Lewis and Wigen (1997). For a civilizational approach, see Arjomand (2014).

\[\text{v}\] Such as MERCOSUR and UNASUR in Latin America, the Organization of American States, ASEAN in Asia, and the Organization of African Unity.

\[\text{vi}\] For example, the idea of freedom has been differently understood in Asia and Africa (see Taylor 2002). See also Bayly (2011) on the liberal tradition in India.

\[\text{vii}\] Eastern Christianity is a complicating case. See Delanty (2013: Chapter 4).

\[\text{viii}\] Therborn’s model (developed further in Therborn 2012) sees Europe as largely internally defined, neglecting the formative impact of the encounter with the rest of the world, and overemphasizes the role of Europe in the shaping of other formations of modernity.

\[\text{ix}\] The debate about Asian values as underpinning an Asian modernity is a largely Chinese political and normative discourse and lacks a social scientific basis. See also Duara (2014).