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# From interpretation to civilization – and back: Analyzing the trajectories of non-European modernities

**Peter Wagner**
*ICREA and University of Barcelona, Spain*

**Abstract**
This article identifies civilizational analysis as one response to a recent crisis in the sociology of large-scale social configurations and explores how far the concept of civilization can go in analyzing the contemporary global social constellation. The reasoning proceeds in four steps. First, a brief review of the recent conceptual debate in social theory and historical sociology leads to the conclusion that concepts such as 'civilization' and 'modernity' still work with too strong presuppositions about continuity and commonality of patterns of world interpretation. Second, a proposal is made to distinguish several basic problématiques that all human collectivities need to address and to suggest that such a distinction lends itself to research-oriented disentangling of various aspects of social phenomena. In an explorative manner, third, this approach will be applied to South Africa and Brazil, two social configurations that can fruitfully be studied as collectivities but lend themselves much less to civilizational analysis. By way of conclusion, finally, the trajectories of these non-European modernities will briefly be compared to the European one to illustrate the potential of this approach for a global sociology of plural trajectories of modernity.

**Keywords**
Brazil, civilization, Europe, modernity, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**
Peter Wagner, Departament de Teoria Sociològica, Filosofia del Dret i Metodologia de les Ciències Socials, Facultat d'Economia i Empresa, Edifici Principal, Torre 2–4 planta, Tinent Coronel Valenzuela, 1-11, E-08034 Barcelona
Email: peter.wagner@ub.edu

## The destructuring of social theory and the rise of civilizational analysis

Until the late 1960s, structuralism and structural-functionalism – and the accompanying sociological theory of modernization – had provided objectivist pictures of society that rested on the idea of strong ties between human beings guaranteeing coherence and a stable socio-political order. The conceptual elements varied between the approaches, but some combination of an interest-based, an identity-based or an institution-based explanation, emphasizing structure and social class, system and function, culture and nation, and procedure, law and state respectively, was always at play. The analysis of entire socio-political configurations, then generally referred to as 'societies', did not appear to pose any major conceptual or empirical problem.

In the area of sociological theory, this thinking was challenged in all respects during the 1970s and 1980s. To give just some key examples: Anthony Giddens's work stands for the turn away from functionalism; Pierre Bourdieu's for the opening up of the structuralist tradition towards considerations of issues of temporality and agency; and Jürgen Habermas and Alain Touraine tried to diagnose contemporary Western societies without entirely fixing their institutional structures in any modernized version of a philosophy of history. In addition, empirical findings proliferated on subjects as diverse as personal identity and selfhood, forms of political participation or technologies and organizational forms of production, which all undermined the image of a generally stable and well-ordered society which had prevailed in the sociology of the 1950s and early 1960s. These theoretical and empirical developments have led to a situation in which many of the established categories of sociology have been challenged by a justified and irrefutable critique. In one sense, it seems as if contemporary modernity requires a new sociology for its analysis. In another sense, though, 'modernity' may itself look like one of those overly presupposition-rich concepts that can no longer be sustained, at least not as a term capturing the basic features of an entire social configuration (see Yack, 1997).

In some strands of debate, the postulation of 'collective concepts' (Max Weber) without sufficient investigation of the social phenomena they referred to became the explicit target of criticism. This line of criticism recently moved into emphasizing ideas of increased 'individuality' and tendencies towards 'individualization' in contemporary social life. The emergence and assertion of the individual as a being without predetermined strong connections to, or within, collectivities have moved to the centre of sociological interest. Together with the parallel debate on 'globalization', a sociological image of the contemporary world has emerged in which there are no social phenomena 'between' the singular human being, on the one end, and structures of global extension, on the other. The concomitant rise of an individualist-atomist ontology, most explicitly in rational-choice theories, makes it difficult to even conceive of social phenomena other than aggregations of individual acts. The view of globalization as an unstoppable and uncontrollable dynamics, as also largely in Anthony Giddens's metaphor of the 'juggernaut', underestimates the significance of its human-made character, thus its being amenable to reinterpretation and change. And the displacement of the idea of radical change from the collectivity and its history to the singular human being and her/his 'bare life' (Giorgio Agamben) completes the new image of a world in which social relations

may have global extensions, but are so thin and ephemeral that contemporary modern human beings are held to realize their own lives in a social context that they cannot conceive of as their own. As the earth becomes entirely subjected to human intervention, the world, in the sense of the social space that human beings inhabit, recedes into unrecognizability – a situation Hannah Arendt had described as 'worldlessness'.

This is an image of contemporary modernity that at best captures some recent tendencies in the restructuring of social relations; it can hardly be upheld as the basis for a renewed sociology of contemporary social configurations. If it were valid as the characterization of inescapable trends, then the social world would be devoid of social structures as well as of forms of domination. It would be inhabited by individual human beings pursuing their lives by constantly reshaping their orientations, achieving what they achieve on the basis of their abilities alone, and moving in an open social space which itself would be constantly adjusting in line with the evolving orientations of the human beings that populate it.

This imagery refers to observable transformations but conceptualizes them in such a way that their current force is exaggerated and their future continuation held to be inescapable. Importantly, the current image works with the extreme end-points of social life, the globe and the human body, and thus conceptualizes away any structured existence of 'the social'. Historically, sociology has always refused to accept any imagery of this kind. It elaborated and insisted on an understanding of 'the social' as that which is in-between singular human beings, precedes their interpretations of the world and is amenable to reinterpretations. For some periods and for some authors, true, the concept of 'society' suggested that such 'social' had an eternal form – or had found its lasting form in 'modern society'. This was an error from which sociology has started to awaken. It now needs to take up its historical agenda of analysing and understanding the major transformations of the social, and it needs to do so with regard to the current such transformations, without accepting the ideological prejudice that those transformations spell the very end of this agenda.

In response to this challenge, some authors, and among them most notably and most subtly Johann Arnason, have revived the concept of 'civilization'. Noting the link between the concepts of civilization and culture, Arnason (2003: 1–2) neatly captures both the specificity of civilizational analysis and the two key dimensions any such analysis needs to address: 'interpretations of culture can focus on comprehensive forms of social life as well as on the constitutive patterns of meaning which make such forms durable and distinctive'. In other words, civilizational analysis deals with interpretations and meanings and it asks to what degree such interpretations are deeply *shared by a collectivity* so that they provide the basis of forms of life, and to what degree they are patterned so that they become *continuous over extended stretches of time*. Historically, civilizational analysis has mostly presupposed highly affirmative responses to both the questions about commonality and continuity. The current re-reading in a pluralist light, such as Arnason's, turns such presuppositions into questions for analysis, even though arguably some considerable commonality and continuity need to exist to speak of a civilization.

The following reflections are meant to explore how far such a concept of civilization can go in analyzing the contemporary global social constellation. More specifically, it will raise some doubts about the ability of even pluralist civilizational analysis, and the

associated 'multiple modernities' approach, to fully open up to an empirically observable lack of identity over time and the less than comprehensive grip of patterns of meaning on the members of a collectivity. The reasoning will proceed in four steps. First, a brief review of the recent conceptual debate in social theory and historical sociology will lead to the conclusion that concepts such as 'civilization' and 'modernity' still work with too strong presuppositions about continuity and commonality and need disentangling. Second, a proposal will be made to distinguish several basic problématiques that all human collectivities need to address and to suggest that such distinction lends itself to research-oriented disentangling of various aspects of social phenomena. Third, in an explorative manner, this approach will be applied to South Africa and Brazil, two social configurations that can fruitfully be studied as collectivities but lend themselves much less to civilizational analysis. Finally, by way of conclusion, the trajectories of these non-European modernities will briefly be compared to the European one to illustrate the potential of this approach for a global sociology of plural trajectories of modernity.

## Continuity and commonality in the transformations of the social: from multiple modernities to societal self-understandings

The approach proposed here joins in with developments in social theory and historical macro-sociology such as the return to human agency in the so-called 'structure–agency debate' of the 1980s (with Giddens, 1984, as the main reference here); the overcoming of evolutionist approaches and the critique of unfounded use of 'collective concepts' (Max Weber; most important here Mann, 1986); and the more recent elaboration of theories of social change that emphasize collective creativity and the reinterpretative, cultural component in every major social transformation (Sewell, 2005).

Turning away from any idea of evolution as differentiation, theories of the constitution of societies see the formation of patterned social life not as the result of a meta-historical logic but as the work of human action and creativity. The terminology goes back to Anthony Giddens's path-breaking volume *The Constitution of Society* (1984), which suggests a theory of 'structuration' of society that fully takes agentiality and historicity into account. Giddens offered a compelling critique of functionalism as a social theory that starts with a concept of 'society' and suggests a logic of evolution of societies in terms of functional differentiation that proves unsustainable on both theoretical and historical grounds. Alternatively, he suggested that any society is constituted through the practices of its living members who are, in principle, capable of altering through creative agency any 'social structure' that they inherited from the preceding generation. Proponents of differentiation theory, whether of a strictly functionalist or of a 'softer' kind, have never been able to convincingly respond to the critique by Giddens and other authors who participated in the return to agency in social theory. Giddens, unfortunately, never followed up on his own programme for a social theory of long-term transformations, but other, more historically inclined sociologists have taken up the issue and have tried to apply versions of structuration theory to the historical analysis of social configurations. For present purposes, the works by Michael Mann and William Sewell are particularly noteworthy.

In his *Sources of Social Power* (2 vols, 1986, 1993), Mann provides an impressive long-term analysis of power 'from its beginnings' to the early twentieth century. He proposes an approach focused on networks of variable forms of power that may have different spatial extension and different durability and, accordingly, rejects any notion of 'society' because it makes too many presuppositions about the coherence of social practices. He addressed the specificity of Europe, a theme central to sociological debate at least since Weber, in terms of the emergence of a 'European dynamic' after the crowning of Charlemagne as Emperor by the Pope in 800 CE. Significantly, Mann sees this event as a rupture that creates a novel trajectory, thus ruling out all possibility of considering the Roman Republic and Empire as the 'seedbed' (Talcott Parsons) of European modernity.

Mann offers a concise and innovative general conceptual proposal and then 'applies' it in lengthy analyses of historical developments. Particularly visible now in the collection of essays, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformations* (2005), William Sewell, in contrast, focused on a more fine-tuned conceptual elaboration that has evolved from selective historico-sociological analysis, in particular, on the history of the French Revolution and its long nineteenth-century aftermath. For instance, he analyzed the interactions between the Parisian population, the National Assembly in Versailles, and the French king in the days before and after 14 July 1789 to see how 'the French Revolution' was created from an open sequence of local actions and interpretations. We retain here specifically the notions of an 'event' as a structure-transforming occurrence and of 'collective creativity' as frequently a key ingredient that turns an occurrence into an event in the afore-mentioned sense.

The juxtaposition of Mann and Sewell's works as cornerstones for rebuilding a historically sensitive social theory shows that considerable problems remain. Sewell acknowledges that his approach, as elaborated thus far, will tend to favour relatively small-scale occurrences, of which the larger and long-term implications can be convincingly shown, as his analysis of the storming of the Bastille demonstrates, but whose analysis does not yet amount to an investigation of long-term developments as such. Thus, his work does not enable us to answer the question whether a common pattern of meaning, which we could call 'European civilization', pre-existed the French Revolution and provided resources for its possibility. Nor can we conclude from his work that the structure-transforming event of the storming of the Bastille marks the birth of modernity as a rupture with any preceding comprehensive form of social life. For the analysis of such long-term trajectories, Sewell merely points to Mann's work as an example that such an extension of his own approach is possible. Looking at Mann from this angle, in turn, it becomes evident that the conceptually guided description of long-term developments tends to lead to an imagery of multi-faceted, entangled processes of network expansion and contraction in which it becomes difficult to answer sharply posed questions about continuities and commonalities.

The problem thus is: the most persuasive work at the interface of social theory and comparative-historical sociology gives us little leeway to answer the question whether there is such long-term continuity and large-scale commonality in human history that suggests the use of the concept 'civilization'. Does this imply that we need to 'drop' the question, to use one of Richard Rorty's favourite metaphors (e.g. Rorty, 1989), to consider it as one of the concerns of the philosophy of history that now have been overcome

because we have no means to address them? The following considerations are motivated by the insight that such 'dropping' is no solution. Methodological obstacles need to be overcome wherever there is reason to assume that some commonality and continuity exist, however difficult it may be to trace them in detail. There just sometimes may be social phenomena of large size and relatively stable long-term duration for which one cannot easily say how they, or some of their features, persist across large spatio-temporal envelopes.

Towards this end, the elaboration of a concept of 'societal self-understanding' is proposed here. Such a concept permits us to step back from both the traditional view that 'social structures' directly determine human action and cause social change, on the one hand, and the more recently emerging view that all social phenomena can be explained by means of the aggregation of the rational actions of individuals, on the other. The very usefulness of the concept of 'society' has been an issue of debate within sociology (from Alain Touraine to Michael Mann; most recently Outhwaite, 2005). The criticism is based on grounds of empirical observation and theoretical reasoning. On the one hand, recent social change is said to have led to the dissolution of the coherence of national societies in economic, cultural and political respects; on the other hand, theoretical reflection has tended to deny the validity of Durkheim's proposition to see 'society' as a reality *sui generis* above and beyond human motivations and actions. Valid as both of these observations are, it remains nevertheless true that human beings have endowed themselves with the capacity to collectively act upon their ways of living together and that a purely juridico-political concept such as the state does not capture the manifold ways in which such action is possible. Rather than abandoning the concept of 'society', the task is to re-conceptualize it beyond notions such as 'national character', 'people's spirit' or 'collective identity', the more time-honoured ones of which had already been effectively criticized by Max Weber (Wagner, 2009). The concept of 'self-understanding' provides such a more tenable underpinning of 'society'. Rather than on high commonality among its members or on socio-structural cohesion, it focuses on communication between human beings about the basic rules and resources they share, and on the sedimented results of such communication. As such, it draws on the idea of societal 'mise en forme', implicit in Tocqueville and actualized by Claude Lefort (1986) and relates to Cornelius Castoriadis' concept of 'imaginary signification of society' (1975; Arnason, 1989) , recently popularized by Charles Taylor (2005).

Partly replacing, partly complementing socio-structural and aggregative analysis, the study of societal self-understandings also points beyond the recent debate on multiple modernities, which has had the enormous merit of (re-)introducing the idea of a possible plurality of modes of socio-political organization into the analysis of 'modern societies'. Significantly, the approach that is central to this opening, pioneered by Shmuel Eisenstadt (see, e.g. 2002, 2003), explained the persistent plurality through 'cultural programmes', thus introducing an interpretative approach, in methodological terms, and some idea similar to what we here refer to as 'societal self-understanding', in substantive terms. This approach has been widely received and recognized; however, it has failed to make the innovative impact that one could have expected.

This – relative – failure is, among other reasons, due to two weaknesses of the approach. First, the strong idea of 'cultural programme' suggests considerable coherence

of the large-scale collectivities that are analyzed as forms of modernity. Unsurprisingly, many contributors to the debate now reason in terms of civilizations, and 'classical' civilizations like the Chinese, Japanese or also Indian have been key objects for the identification of multiple modernities. As a consequence, considerable limitations to the applicability of the approach are introduced, as it is difficult to conceive of South Africa or Brazil or even the USA or Australia in terms of deep-rooted, rather coherent cultural programmes that merely unfold in the encounter with novel situations.

Second, the approach overemphasizes continuity and undertheorizes change, despite Shmuel Eisenstadt's emphasis on contestation. This difficulty is due to the fact that the approach is based on only two main concepts: the characteristic (common and inevitable) features of modernity, on the one hand, and the (variety of) cultural programmes, on the other. As a consequence, the advent of modernity is an occurrence that requires a step out of the comparative-historical analysis of civilizations, as it appears external to them, to then be reintroduced as the encounter of a cultural programme with an exogenous modernity. The only exception is (North-west) European history, and thus the problematic primacy of Europe in the analysis of modernity is inadvertently reintroduced (for a discussion of the relation between 'civilization' and 'modernity', see Arnason, 2003: 34–51).

Against the background of these deficiencies of the multiple modernities debate, sketched briefly here with little nuance, the requirements for innovation in the comparative sociology of contemporary societies and their historical trajectories stand out clearly. For most current cases, first, the self-understanding of societies has not been stable for centuries but has undergone significant transformations, often even and especially in the recent past. Thus, there is no underlying cultural programme but rather an ongoing process of – more or less collective – interpretation of one's situation in the light of crucial experiences made in earlier situations (for the 'successive modernities' [Johann Arnason] of Western Europe, see Wagner, 1994). Second, rather than separating 'culture' from the institutional girders of modernity, one needs to demonstrate if and how reinterpretations of a society's self-understanding have an impact on institutional change, or in other words, how cultural-interpretative transformations are related to socio-political transformations (Sewell, 2005; see Raaflaub, 2010, for a similar analysis of the emergence of democracy in ancient Greece).

In some recent scholarship, these two steps have been taken. However, the impact of these innovations is still limited, mostly due to two reasons: first, the identification both of societal self-understandings and of their articulation with institutional forms still poses problems for research, despite important steps towards the operationalization of concepts (see below); and second, there are inherent difficulties of substantively rich – i.e. not merely indicator-based – comparisons of large societies with rather different historical trajectories (discussed later).

## The basic problématiques of human social life: towards a novel comparative sociology of trajectories of modernity

The main challenge for an interpretative-institutional comparative sociology is the analysis of societal self-understandings and their transformations in such a way that

comparability between societies becomes possible. Self-understandings may – and will tend to – refer to aspects and events that are specific to a given society, such as the moment of foundation – e.g. the (contested) idea of the birth of the United States out of the spirit of Lockean individualism (Hartz, 1955) – or a highly significant collective experience – e.g. the (recently debated) self-understanding of the Italian Republic in the light of the *Resistenza* against fascism and occupation. These notions, valid as they may (or may not) be, do not lend themselves directly to comparison with other societies, or, if so, only on a far too general level.

In response to such important objections, it is suggested to abstract from those identifiable self-understandings those elements that concern a *limited set of basic problématiques* that all human societies need to address. In earlier work, we proposed a set of questions: (a) as to what certain knowledge a societal self-understanding is seen to rest upon; (b) as to how to determine and organize the rules for the life in common; and (c) as to how to satisfy the basic material needs for societal reproduction, and referred to these questions as the epistemic, the political, and the economic problématique respectively (Wagner, 2008; for a related attempt at disentangling, see Domingues, 2006). To say that a society embraces a *modern* self-understanding, furthermore, implies that all these questions are truly open; that answers to them are not externally given but need to be found; and that, therefore, contestation of the validity of existing answers is always possible.

The distinction of these problématiques marks the first step towards the disentangling of societal features that then can be systematically compared. In brief, the fact that societies need to effectively address these problématiques by searching for their own answers is what is common among all 'modernities'. And the facts that (a) the questions are open to interpretation; (b) there is not any one answer that is clearly superior to all others (even though one answer can certainly be better than others and societies will search for the better ones and/or those that are more appropriate to them); and (c), thus, that several answers can legitimately and usefully be given constitutes the *possible plurality* of modernity.

In the second step, the range of possible answers can be further identified in a relatively general and abstract way by scrutinizing the history of epistemological, political and economic thought, even though one will need to be aware of the risk of Eurocentrism if such reconstruction stays close to the currently established canon. In a very synthetic way, the following key issues emerge.

The epistemic problématique interrogates first of all the degree of certainty of knowledge human beings can attain with regard to themselves, to their social life, and to nature. Translating this issue into socio-political matters, it further raises the question to what degree such knowledge can or should be used to determine socio-political issues. Given that answers to both of the preceding questions can be contested under conditions of modernity, third, one needs to ask how far claims to certain knowledge – in comprehensive world-views – can be made collectively binding in any given society. This last question directly links the epistemic to the political problématique. The central issue of the latter concerns the relation between those matters that should/need to be dealt with in common and those others that should/can be left to individual self-determination. Modernity's basic commitment to autonomy leaves the relation

between individual autonomy (freedom from constraint, or freedom from domination) and collective autonomy (democracy) rather wide open to interpretation. Despite occasional claims to the contrary, modern political theory has not provided a single and unique answer; thus, there is a plurality of interpretations. More specifically, the political problématique also concerns the extension and mode of participation in political decision-making (the question of citizenship) as well as the mode of aggregation in the process of collective will formation (the question of representation). The centre of the economic problématique is the question how best to satisfy human material needs, and it can be alternatively answered in terms of productive efficiency and in terms of congruence with societal values and norms. Among the latter, the commitment to individual freedom may rank highly, in which case freedom of commerce will be considered, at least partially, an appropriate institutional solution. But other values – including value-based responses to the epistemic or political problématiques – can complement, or compete with, the value of individual freedom, in which case other answers are required (the classic, path-setting study is Polanyi, 1944; see now Joerges et al., 2005).

In all its brevity, this account should have demonstrated that: (a) there is a plurality of possible ways of responding to these basic problématiques, even under conditions of modernity (against a key assumption of much social and political theory culminating in the works of – as different as these authors are – Talcott Parsons, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas); (b) further to their internal openness to contestation and interpretation, the responses to these problématiques can be articulated in different ways; and (c) the need to articulate individual and collective autonomy is a thread common to all problématiques, and it is central to the political one.

Based on such disentangling of the concept of 'modern societal self-understandings', it is also possible to operationalize the analysis of major societal transformation, that is, introduce a historical, dynamic perspective into the analysis of, indeed, trajectories of modernity. Such transformations, and this is the third step of operationalization, will now be identified in terms of either changes in the responses given to a single problématique or in the articulation between problématiques, or both. Given the increase in specificity, compared to the more general concept 'self-understanding', such changes can often also be directly related to institutional change, such as, for example, constitutional change in the relation between church and state, or the forms of embeddedness of market self-regulation.

In historical analysis, such transformations can be traced to 'events' (Sewell) in which actors respond to experiences they have made through reinterpretation of their understandings of the basic problématiques. Often, such an event will be the experience of failure of an established response to one or more of those problématiques. The reinterpretation will aim to provide a superior answer through the mobilization of the available cultural resources. This mobilization entails collective creativity; thus there is no cultural or civilizational determination (even though there may be path dependency). In turn, there is no guarantee of lasting superiority of the new answer, as any new response may generate new fault lines; thus, any view of societal 'evolution' as necessarily entailing learning processes that lead to higher levels of human social organization is equally flawed.

## The current plurality of global modernity: postcolonial situations and the characteristics of the South African and Brazilian trajectories

The recent research on plural forms of modern socio-political organization has had a particular empirical focus on settings that lend themselves more to civilizational analysis than others, to be explained against the basic assumptions held and methodologies preferred. Thus, considerable work has been done on the 'classic' civilizational areas, such as China, Japan and India. There is also relevant work on predominantly Islamic societies, but this work is strongly pre-determined by the questions whether modernity and Islam are compatible, in a culturalist vein or critical thereof, or what the obstacles to development in those societies are, in a neo-modernist vein. In all these cases, the – *prima facie* plausible – assumption of radical cultural diversity between these regions and the alleged 'original' modernity of the West works so strongly in favour of culturalist or neo-modernist approaches – the choice often depending more on the scholar than on the findings – that breakthroughs towards novel understandings of current global modernity are practically impossible at the current state of debate, despite all the merits of many of the existing studies. An important exception here is scholarship in cultural studies, in which, however, problématiques of modern self-understandings often tend to be dissolved into processes of 'glocalization' or 'hybridization', losing sight of the valid questions that stood behind 'Eurocentric' conceptual frames that underpinned colonial domination (Chakrabarty, 2000).

In contrast, the question of the specificity of modernity cannot be avoided in all cases of the 'founding of new societies', to use the formula that Louis Hartz (1964) employed for the analysis of societies in which groups of colonial settlers interacted with native populations, in obviously highly asymmetric ways, in the institution of new societies. While the colonial period mostly goes back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the actual founding of societies often occurred at the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century in conjunction with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and sometimes in conscious application of social contract theories. Thus, there is no doubt about the modernity of such newly founded, indeed first post-colonial societies in terms of commitment to collective self-determination. At the same time, the terms of the contract, so to say, often deviated considerably from the European or French understandings, in the light of the particular situation in those societies, and the 'contracts' kept undergoing changes in the face of further experience (e.g. Beilharz, 2008; Lake, 2008). In other words, postcolonial societies of this kind are, on the one hand, clearly analyzable in terms of their ways of handling the modern problématiques, but on the other, they have embarked on historical trajectories that vary considerably from the European one.

Of the 'new societies' of this kind, only the US has been the object of sustained scholarly debate about 'self-understandings', to a significant degree taking off from Louis Hartz's earlier – and much better known – work, the identification of individualist liberalism as the societal self-understanding of the US (Hartz, 1955). This analysis has been widely debated and, at some distance, been opposed by, first, an insistence on the republican tradition in the American self-understanding (Pocock, 1975) and, second, by the identification of a plural communitarianism on a liberal background (Walzer, 2001) as

the twentieth-century self-understanding of the US. Significantly, these responses to Hartz, as important as their contribution to political theory has been, have largely ignored both the native population of North America and the African-Americans as forced settlers and have thus provided a very partial view of the American self-understanding. In this sense, they fall behind the much earlier study of 'the American dilemma' in which Gunnar Myrdal (1944) aimed at analyzing what was then known as 'the Negro question' in terms of an 'American creed' (as a remedy, see Henningsen, 2009).

The strong interest in the North American self-understanding is related to the long dominant position of the US in world politics, and its particular expression needs to be understood against the background of the almost accomplished extinction of native Americans and the dominated position of African-Americans, who as the most sizable minority in the US are predominantly of lower class and thus have had considerable difficulties in making their voices heard. Weak scholarly interest in other 'new societies', with the exception of area specialists, needs to be explained in a different way. These societies were too dominated by the European settler groups to find strong interest in postcolonial studies, which have focused on South Asia (the most innovative one being Chakrabarty, 2000, conceptually significant also for this project) and, to some extent, on de-colonized African societies. In turn, they have been analyzed by modernization theorists mostly because their 'delays' in modernization were in need of explanation – this holds in particular for Latin American societies that looked sufficiently 'Western' to raise developmentalist expectations but then fell short of fulfilling them. Or alternatively, Marx-inspired analyses, often from within these societies, developed critiques of modernization theory, but without elaborating new angles on modernity. In the perspective developed here, in contrast, it is precisely for the reason of this ambiguous position that the study of 'new societies' can generate not only novel insights on the trajectories of these societies but can also trigger conceptual innovation in social and political theory and in comparative historical and political sociology.

South Africa and Brazil are particularly suitable choices for an innovative analysis of the plural trajectories of modernity as they share some features that support an analysis in the proposed terms.[1] First, both societies show particularly pronounced and complex relations between the various population groups, a fact that has enhanced the need for these groups to consciously reflect on their own societal self-understanding. Second, both societies have initially adopted rather specific political forms, addressing the particularity of their colonial experiences in terms of both the external relation to the 'mother country' (or countries, in the case of South Africa) and the internal relations between the population groups. Third, both societies have responded to further experiences through post-colonial transformative reinterpretations of their initial self-understanding and by developing a conscious self-understanding or even 'project' of their own particular modernity. Fourth, in both societies, the most recent phase of fully inclusive democracy showed features of a particularly pronounced societal reflexivity (epitomized by the Brazilian transformations leading up to the Porto Alegre World Social Forum, in the one case, and by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in the other), having had strong repercussions in global debate. Fifth, both societies also show extremely high social inequality and face the urgency to address this situation, not least in the face of widespread violence and crime. And, finally, both societies experienced considerable

industrial development and have, at times, consciously deployed economic policy strategies, placing them firmly as important actors in the current global context.

At the same time, there are numerous fundamental differences between South Africa and Brazil, and as in the case of the similarities, these are differences that lend themselves to comparatively elucidate the conditions for the formation of societal self-understandings. We can identify some general aspects and then further differentiate according to the ways in which the basic problématiques are addressed. The general aspects concern the early tie to the mother country and the kind of 'colonial encounter' (Asad, 1995) between the population groups.

Brazil emerged from a conscious, state-driven colonization project and had long remained subordinated to Portugal, whereas the first Europeans settled in South Africa to support long-distance trade without a colonization project, and the settlers – in particular the first group of Dutch origin, who became the Afrikaner – soon developed a new collective identity that was disconnected from their origins (Thompson, 1964). Brazilian colonization originated, like most other cases, as the settlement of one group of Europeans on territory inhabited by a native population. The situation changed drastically when for economic reasons large numbers of Africans were re-settled and forced to live and work as slaves, creating a society composed of members of three distinct origins. While the latter also holds for South Africa in general terms, this society originally witnessed a highly conflictual relation between two European settler groups: the Dutch and the British. In particular, the former fought the native population in frontier zones, but both groups otherwise relied on dominated Africans for domestic or farm work and services. In South Africa, too, economic development, in this case gold and diamond mining, altered the relation between groups, as the industrial work of large numbers of Africans transformed domestic subservience into class relations.

In this context, we can discern some key elements of the – rather highly different – ways in which the basic problématiques were addressed.

## *The epistemic problématique*

As a statist project, Brazil 'inherited' Christianity as its official religion from Portugal, and in particular a version of Neo-Thomism as a social and political philosophy that started out from a kind of social contract but emphasized order and hierarchy, while at the same time allowing pragmatic arrangement in everyday situations (Morse, 1964: 153–8). As a planned intervention, Christian colonization embarked on a debate about the nature of the native populations and integrated them, in principle, into the Christian understanding of humanity. Thus, (religious) knowledge resources were employed to guide social and political action on the basis of a concept of humanity that embraced hierarchy without strong boundaries. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the expectation for superior knowledge guiding societal developments was translocated to the sciences, particularly the comprehensive approaches in the social sciences (Schwartzman, 1991).

In contrast, there was no common project, and no pronounced higher-knowledge base either in South African colonization, which was economically founded – initially in commercial terms, then in terms of agricultural subsistence for the first colonists.

The relations to the African population were dominated by military control and economic exploitation, without much further concern about 'the other' (even though there was some Christian Calvinist justification of principled inequality). With growing interdependence of the groups due to industrialization, and in particular with the downward social mobility of the Afrikaner group after the South African War, the weakness of the epistemic basis of social life became problematic. A 'scientific' theory supporting the 'racial' segregation that already existed, and even demanding the formal separation that became known as apartheid, was developed with a marked contribution by sociology, in particular by Afrikaner authors (Coetzee, 1991; Jubber, 2007).

## *The political problématique*

As independent states, Brazil emerged in the form of a constitutional monarchy in 1822 and was transformed into a republic in 1889, and the Union of South Africa in 1910 was the result of the unification of several polities of highly different composition and rule within the British Commonwealth. While the former, in terms of citizenship regime, can at first sight be regarded as pursuing the gradual path towards ever more inclusive democratization not unlike European societies, the latter witnessed increasingly entrenched segregation along with massive denial of rights, including political rights, in particular to the African population. Prior to the return to democracy after a military regime in Brazil and to the end of apartheid in South Africa, the political class in both societies had developed particular mechanisms of 'inclusion' and 'representation': the mass union-centred corporatism in Brazil and the rule through leaders of the segregated groups and 'states' in South Africa. This mechanism came to a radical end with the introduction of equal universal suffrage in South Africa, a major political rupture in this society, and it has become increasingly inoperative in Brazil due to the weakening of the unions in the recent neo-liberal phase of capitalism and the emergence of 'insurgent citizenship' (Holston, 2008) in the urban centres of Brazil. In both cases, recent changes have created novel kinds of political problems, for which new solutions are being sought, often by adapting the former model, but are clearly not yet found (Domingues, 2008; Larrain, 2000). Significantly, though, we may witness in these societies the transformation of 'low-intensity democracy', which was long considered functionally adequate also for Europe and the US, towards more participatory forms of democracy.

## *The economic problématique*

The economic situation of both Brazil and South Africa is marked by availability of resources and thus actual and potential wealth, but also by export dependency and by weak redistribution policies, thus high social inequality. In both cases, as mentioned above, the societal significance of the 'racial' question increased for economic reasons because of slave import in Brazil and internal migration of Africans towards production sites in South Africa. Only in South Africa, though, did a horizontally stratified system of largely endogamous classes emerge due to segregation, whereas 'inter-ethnic' relations have been much more widespread in Brazil with more loose correspondence of skin colour to social class – as well as an official disinterest in this question. Both societies aimed

to move towards greater self-sufficiency, in Brazil, in the form of import substitution policies inspired by dependency theories, in South Africa in response to the – always incomplete – isolation imposed by sanctions against the apartheid regime, but both have also revised these policies more recently (Domingues, 2008).

In both societies, the elites – composed and defined in highly different ways – have long practised a societal organization that depended economically on the majority of the population that was not enfranchised in terms of citizenship. Lack of formal juridico-political citizenship persisted in South Africa until the end of apartheid; in Brazil, formal criteria for dividing the population being historically less pronounced and today absent, the exclusion from political citizenship gradually ceased to exist, but exclusion from social citizenship remains strong. In both cases, the key challenge resides in radically transforming the old model of societal organization. From this brief, conceptually driven account, though, it should already have become clear that meeting this challenge is not 'merely' a matter of a new economic profile (Salais and Storper, 1993) and stronger socio-economic redistribution. What seems to be required – and what is being actively sought in both societies – is a new arrangement of modernity that includes novel forms of (social and political) knowledge as well as novel understandings of citizenship, participation and representation – thus, new answers to the epistemic and political problématiques, too (see Santos, 2006–07).

## Towards a truly global sociology: comparing non-European and European varieties of modernity

After this brief sketch, it is possible to indicate the contours of the comparison between non-European and European trajectories of modernity with a view to opening a perspective on plural forms of modernity that emphasizes interpretation of patterns of meaning without relying on a concept of civilization that seems to be too fraught with historical and theoretical burdens to be fruitful today.

It is part of the 'classic' European self-understanding that polities are in control of their territory and are built by, and on the foundation of, homogeneous populations. These are basic assumptions behind the concepts of, first, state sovereignty and, then, popular sovereignty (even though federalism should not be underestimated as an alternative option long fallen in oblivion). The idea of homogeneity could be expressed alternatively or complementarily in civic, cultural, linguistic, or ethnic terms, but in each case this assumption both alleviated and guided the search for answers to the *political problématique*. The subsequent problems of citizenship and representation were addressed through mostly slow and gradual extension up to equal universal suffrage in the former case (often reached only by 1919, in some cases after the Second World War), and through social cleavage-based formation of political parties in the latter.

The *economic problématique* was 'modernized' in Europe by the idea that extension of the commercial bonds between human beings would either pacify societies or maximize their wealth or both. This thinking inspired the market revolution from the late eighteenth century onwards. Experience with market self-regulation, however, solicited reinterpretations of this idea, which were put forward in a great variety of ways from the

second half of the nineteenth century onwards and all entailed some kind of non-market organization of national economies. These novel responses not only re-articulated the economic and political problématiques, in terms of creating the 'states versus markets' debate, they also entailed the inclusion of the working classes (and sometimes the female population) into the polity, as the period of economic 're-regulation' coincided with the period of extension of citizenship.

Both the original and the revised interpretations of the political and the economic problématiques drew on resources provided by the ways of handling the *epistemic problématique*. In the seventeenth century, European modernity referred to natural rights as a basic orientation. The dissolution of the old regimes, which could no longer be justified, however, created high contingency and radical uncertainty, in response to which new kinds of knowledge were produced, in particular, theories about the social bond that sustained some notions of likely order even under conditions of self-determination. The theories of the commercial bond were mentioned above; theories of the cultural-linguistic bond sustained efforts to solve 'the national question' and create homogeneity; and theories of social interest-based bonds, solidaristic as in Durkheim or antagonistic as in Marx, pushed towards solving 'the social question'. Significantly, the interwar years of the twentieth century saw 'collective existentialisms' emerge from both the 'national' and the 'social' debates, underpinning the rise of totalitarianisms.

It was only in the post-Second World War period that the radical interpretations were defeated and were withdrawn or moderated in Western Europe. The new polities worked with some compromise of liberal, national and social ideas and hoped to bind those ideas together with a more technocratic version of social science as an epistemic reference point. Many observers agree that this model entered a new crisis with new needs for reinterpretation. Debates about neoliberalism, globalization or individualization are indicators of the dissolution of the model, but, as discussed at the outset, they do not indicate directions for new responses, not least because they underestimate the role of collective agency and creativity (Karagiannis and Wagner, 2007). At this point, the trajectories of South Africa and Brazil meet with that of Europe. In the former societies, rather radical transformations are ongoing, whereas in Europe the predominant – and far from insignificant – response is regional integration, often pursued in the hope that more radical reinterpretations can be avoided. The European reinterpretations proceed from a position of superior power in the global context, but not necessarily from a position of richer cultural-interpretative resources at hand to find new answers. Precisely because crucial questions such as those of internal homogeneity or of accomplished social inclusion were considered closed and stabilized in Europe, the European social imaginary may have difficulties in reopening those issues and finding novel solutions. A truly global sociology of modernities will need to consider Europe a particular case among others, not least to be able to retrieve all the resources that might be needed to reach novel solutions that are at least temporarily superior to the old ones.

Like civilizational analysis, this sociology focuses on interpretation as the human way to give form to their world, and like Johann Arnason's approach to civilizations and the multiple modernities debate, it finds persistent plurality of such interpretations even – or in particular – under current conditions of so-called globalization. As the examples of

Brazil, South Africa and Europe should have shown, however, such interpretations are often more contested, more dynamic over time, and less tightly bound to a given collectivity than even a pluralist concept of civilization suggests. Thus, we propose to introduce the concept 'societal self-understanding' to overcome some of the problematic connotations of the concept of 'civilization' and see civilizations as a particular form of societal self-understanding that is highly continuous over time, rather well tied to a given collectivity, and so deeply rooted that it undergoes little contestation at its core. Some such civilizations may exist, but many currently living human beings do not form part of them.

## Note

1. From this point onwards, this section reports on a project, funded by the European Research Council as Advanced Grant no. 294348, that aims at providing a broad reassessment of existing research on those 'new societies' by rereading it under the angle of societal self-understandings. It will focus in particular on South Africa and Brazil including in-depth studies of their historical trajectories and current interpretations of modernity. For this reason, we will now further concretize the approach by discussing, in a very preliminary way that will still be subject to verification in the project itself, some main features of these societies.

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## About the author

**Peter Wagner** is ICREA Research Professor at the University of Barcelona. His recent publications include *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation* (Polity Press, 2008) and *Varieties of*

*World-making: Beyond Globalization* (ed. with Nathalie Karagiannis, Liverpool University Press, 2007). *Address*: Departament de Teoria Sociològica, Filosofia del Dret i Metodologia de les Ciències Socials, Facultat d'Economia i Empresa, Edifici Principal, Torre 2–4 planta, Tinent Coronel Valenzuela, 1-11, E-08034 Barcelona. [email: peter.wagner@ub.edu]