

The three epochs of western modernity

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Session: "Modernity or Modernities: Should we Speak of Modernity in the Plural?"

Already in 1982 Lyotard claimed that postmodernity should not be seen as something totally different from modernity, but rather as a part of modernity. Today the polarized debate between "modernists" and "postmodernists" seems to be over and postmodernity "refers to a particular phase in modern society" (Delanty). We have not left modernity behind us, we are rather living in "another modernity" (Beck) or – to put the same idea in slightly different words - in a society which is "modern in a different way" (Bauman). Postmodernist theory has had a crucial significance for any attempt to break the spell of "modernization theory". However, instead of using the confusing term postmodernity we should now rather be talking in terms of a transformation of modernity, that is, in terms of different epochs *within* modernity.

This paper is not first and foremost about different paths to modernity or different forms of modernity in different parts of the world, but rather an attempt to break with old modernization theory in our efforts to understand the "heartland" of modernity, that is, "western modernity". My claim is that there is not one kind of western modernity, but a history of modernity with different epochs succeeding each other. The one is not more or less modern than the other, but only different. Thus, such a history of modernity should not be conceptualized in an evolutionary manner. We are not becoming more and more or less and less modern, rather western modernity is transforming itself. A theory of different epochs of modernity is crucial if we want to avoid a misunderstanding of western social conditions. It is especially important today when we seem to be in the middle of a transformation from one epoch to another. Such a theory is also necessary for an understanding of differences between different parts of the western world and of what kind of influences western culture has on other parts of the world.

A theory about different epochs of western modernity must be able to show that these epochs both have something in common and something which is different. I will use both Peter Wagner's theory about a history of modernity and Jürgen Habermas's theory about different paradigms of law (in *Faktizität und Geltung*) to develop such a theory. In both theories we find three - and not two - epochs of western modernity, in contrast to theories which are more close to postmodernist thinking such as Beck's, Bauman's and even Giddens's. Wagner's theory is the most useful one for my purposes, but it is still very underdeveloped and he has very little to say about the third, contemporary, epoch. Habermas's history of modernity is made much more *en passant*, but he distinguishes very clearly between three epochs. However, his third paradigm of law is mostly a normative construction and the whole conception shows that Habermas after all still is caught by evolutionism. Further, his theory of societal transformation builds heavily on the development of law and not on social conditions in general. In the paper I will discuss the merits and the weaknesses of these conceptions and also include useful ideas from more postmodern inclined thinkers, as those just mentioned, in order to develop a general theory of the

transformation of western modernity. My aim is to do this not only on a macro- but also on a micro-level. The theory should not only include the transformation of political, legal and economic institutions and structures, but also transformations of the forms of personal identities and fact to face interactions.