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Europe in High Modernity

Reflections on a Theory of the 20th Century

JMEH 2007 5, 2007, S. 5-21.

1. Concepts of European History in the 20th Century

There is a whole range of very different attempts at writing a history of the 20th century. Aside from the approaches by Tony Judt or Volker Berghahn, which concentrate on the first or second half of the century, the most common approach structurally follows the three major political watersheds of 1914/1918, 1945, 1990. Within the frame of these data, the respective national history is then narrated separately for and unto itself. That is in keeping with the tradition of largely autonomous national history, with interstate linkages primarily in the realm of foreign relations. The nation-state dominates the perspective: material-temporal focal points, periodizations and the privileging of certain levels of historical events are all oriented to their respective role in the development of the specific nation-state. Processes extending beyond nation x or y tend to be excluded, or restricted to being viewed through the lens of the nation-state and its narrative. Two problems result from this: first, in this way too little attention is given to a key phenomenon: the declining influence of the nation-state since the second half of the century. And second, no productive hard criteria are generated for a usable *comparative* approach.

Yet this apparent aporia has also confirmed the impression that if we want to properly understand some of the central *pan*-European developments, the national framework is clearly insufficient. If all we use are explanatory categories of the nation-state, how can we grasp historical phenomena that are supra-regional? They extend from imperialism to the modern dictatorships, from the class conflicts of the 1920s to the youth revolt of the 60s, from the impact of the Great Depression to the economic miracle of the West German 1950s to the oil crisis of 1973. All these were clearly *variants of shared fundamental transnational processes* rather than nationally autochthonous developments. Yet the dominant perspective in Europe, now as before, tends to be one which concentrates on the the nation-state as the quasi natural aggregation of historical development.

A second vantage contrasts with this: namely the effort to build a synthetic approach that extends beyond the arbitrary limits and boundaries of the nation-state. As a rule, such approaches are overarching in terms of thematics and oriented to the transnational dimension. Thematic fields such as "industrialization," "European revolutions," "processes of

migration in Europe” or the “European women’s movement” can be best presented in this way. Yet as the foundation for a European pan-history they are too unwieldy. Such a sectoral approach transports the vision of a common European society into the past, and then explores the more distant and recent past looking for continuity, common lines and traditions – almost as if the nation-state were just some kind of mistaken detour taken over the past 150 years, when contrasted with an otherwise basically *common core* European experience. Numerous studies that build broad arches spanning from the Middle Ages or the Early Modern period down into the present awaken this notion: a European history that is basically held in common and shared, interrupted and led astray by the errant path taken by the nation-states model over the past 150 years. Yet the 19th and 20th centuries resist decoding if they are read solely beyond the perspective of the nation-state.

Doubtless, a truly European history can be most readily developed using comparative approaches. Decisive here are always the criteria used for measurement and comparison. These must be suitable for the objects compared and must take a whole ensemble into proper account: the important, large-scale, durable processes, the crucial events, political, economic and social progress and success, the welter of catastrophes. If you take all this together, you get a complex of levels for comparison. And on this basis it would be possible to investigate European national histories and supra-national structures and trans-national processes in regard to their shared common basic structures. That would provide a *tertium comparationis* which would enable us to differentiate between variants of common European development on the one hand, and developments that are nationally specific on the other – i.e. to differentiate between what is similar, the same and different.

The best-known types of such theoretical constructs are the political-ideological grand narratives. Like the Marxist narrative, for major example, that reads European history in the 20th century as a conflict between the working class and the bourgeoisie. The original goal of the workers’ movement to improve social living conditions, becoming the project of destroying the class and social structures of bourgeois-capitalist society and the establishment of socialism. History was also structured in terms of a dichotomy from this perspective: the oppressed versus the oppressors, meaning the workers’ movement against the bourgeoisie. The latter, under frontal attack by the workers’ movement, joined hands with the forces of the nationalists and fascists in order to preserve its rule. In this Marxist view, that led to the contrast in world geopolitics between the communist and capitalist camps after 1945; the problems between the Global North and South are also viewed as rooted in this structure. European history of the 20th century is then expanded into a theory of world history in the 20th century on a planetary scale.

The social-historical basis of this theory is industrialism and its spread. It was linked to the mass army of industrial workers, the hegemony of industrial methods of production and the contradiction between capital and labor. Yet with the emergence of post-industrial developments, it lost a hefty portion of its explanatory potential. Moreover, at its core it was a static theory. It proceeded from the condition of the bourgeois world in the two decades

around the turn of the century. It did not perceive changes in Western societies and was pretty blind to those in the communist states as well.

The most prominent variant of secular historical narratives of the 20th century is that of the German *special path*, the *Sonderweg*, contrasted as construct with the West European *normal path*. For decades, this dichotomy was important and fruitful for the internal German debate on the longer-term causes of the National Socialist dictatorship. But over and beyond the specific German relation, it did not develop much explanatory power, since its associated trope of the “long road to the West” presupposed a norm of what was understood by the “West” and “Westernness” that stemmed from the beginning of the 20th century. In many respects, the societies in France, Great Britain, the Benelux states or Scandinavia likewise barely corresponded at the century’s turn to the norms of so-called Westernness. Their changes and their ability to change provided them with the decisive advantage vis-à-vis static models of dictatorship, especially because a clearly definable goal of what was meant by Westernness – which the Germans or the Central Europeans had to be oriented to as a model – did not exist. But a historical approach that proceeds from a model of norm and deviation from that norm has little explanatory value over and beyond a kind of political pedagogy. It lacks the degree of openness necessary to perceive and analyze the many and diverse learning processes involved in the quest for the “right” social order. In 1938, for example, in pan-European terms it was probably more accurate to speak of the few remaining liberal-capitalist democracies as a *special path* – than of the variants of the authoritarian dictatorships that determined the European map at that moment. The latter were dominant. And even at the end of the 1950s, there were still many Western observers who feared (or at least assumed) that over the longer term, the Soviet social order would prove to be superior.

A third approach which makes implicit a theory of the 20th century is that of the European Civil War. It defines the century as the age of the conflict and clash between bourgeois-democratic society and the communist challenge, extending from 1917 to 1990. This approach is to an extent a mirror image of the Marxist one, with reverse values. It has a number of advantages. On the one hand, it offers a comprehensive overarching core of argument for grasping the century: capitalist society is challenged by the communist movement, and ultimately triumphs by dint of economic superiority, better living conditions for most, and especially the postulate of freedom over the postulate of equality, which can also be created by state terror as the engine of equality. The problem associated with this is evident: the expanding radical-nationalistic mass movements in Europe before and after World War One, namely in Germany, Austria and Italy, are viewed here as a reaction to the challenge of communism. In Nolte’s extreme formulation, Auschwitz became the putative emergency act of self-defense by the European bourgeoisie against the prospect of destruction by Bolshevism. Yet what is overlooked here is that the radical-nationalist mass movements in Europe appeared long before the October Revolution of 1917, and were primarily oriented against liberalism. Hence, a European history of the 20th century cannot exclude the experience of fascism and National Socialism; on the other, the decades after

1945 cannot be explained solely by the Cold War. For example, if one considers the various processes of change that West European societies passed through between 1945 and the 1980s. In short: one cannot convincingly narrate the history of the 20th century as the history of the clash between capitalism and communism.

2. Modernization Theory as a Recipe for Development Policy

The diverse variants of modernization theory contain designs and matrices through which we can compare and explain key processes in European, and more specifically West European societies in the 20th century. Several years ago that led to fierce controversies about how German National Socialism could also be integrated into such a structure. Here the fronts in the confrontation of argument were not fully aligned. Some exponents of such a thesis of integration argued that during the Nazi period, there had been a whole series of modernizing effects flowing from the politics of the regime: its social policy, its urge to dynamize class structure, policies of de-regionalization. Some viewed such processes as the unwanted results of National Socialist policy, especially the war, while others stressed intentional endeavors to push toward modernization promoted by the Nazi leadership. But that soon had the same effect as the old stock reference to Hitler's autobahns: "it wasn't all bad, there were good sides too."

Very evidently, the question regarding modernity was placed within a matrix of value judgment and valorization. And the reactions were furious among those insisting that such a perspective played down and even trivialized the evil of National Socialism, perhaps glamorizing its purported 'modernism.' Yet "modernization," some argued, was inconceivable without democratization. The process of modernization was viewed here as a development toward a better world, something most analysts surely did not wish to concede to the Nazis. I don't intend here to enter into the fine points of this largely West German discussion about National Socialism and modernity at the time. This is to point out that this normative use of the concept of modernization, packing it with certain values, is not accidental. It was inscribed in the development of the debate on modernization from its beginnings.

Michael Latham and others have pointed to the genesis of modernization theory, marked by the Cold War, decolonization and the rivalry between the two superpowers over the new nation-states emerging in what came to be called the Third World. The fact that the Soviet Union was enjoying greater success than the US at the time was because, as many American intellectuals and politicians saw it then, communist ideology gave people in the developing world a recipe for advancement. It offered a vision that promised to lead the poor countries of the Global South and East to prosperity and progress, and to do so with almost scientific reliability. This vision – namely after a phase of unprecedented effort, within one or a maximum of two generations, to be able to reach or even surpass the level of development of the industrialized developed societies - had nourished already in the Soviet Union under Stalin the soil of the widespread hopes anticipating the completion of Socialism and the

genesis Soviet Man and Woman. It also had an analogous impact in the new developing countries.

Modernization theory arose with the declared aim of effectively countering the Soviet model with a Western ideology, as conceived by Walt Rostow and others. Based on an analysis of the history of the United States, a kind of normative theory of historical development was constructed. If the corresponding prerequisites could be created in the early phase of industrial development -- a free capitalist market, a functioning state bureaucracy, a democratic social structure, mass education, the creation of an engaged middle class -- then the next stage would come almost inevitably, as part of a regular law of development: extensive industrialization and growth, the genesis of prosperity and social security for growing segments of the population. This fundamental model was soon varied, differentiated and expanded. But in virtually all its variants, it retained the distinctive and peculiar tendency to see the formation of industrial societies in Europe and North America not as an endless diverse, risky and ultimately open process -- but rather to formulate normative models and postulate historical laws. Modernization was the path to bring underdeveloped societies forward toward development and Western value system. Accordingly, a successfully modernizing country was by definition democratic, or a genuine modernization process was not involved.

Yet the wedlock of economic-technical modernization and the formation of liberal democratic social structures has tended to be the exception in recent history. Until recently, that is true when it comes to Japan, China, South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Russia and all the states of the Warsaw Pact, Spain and Portugal, fascist Italy, Nazi Germany. One might even advance a counter-hypothesis that is more to the point: in most societies, the transition, especially from an early to an advanced industrial society, tends to be best implemented with authoritarian and even dictatorial methods. And it was in this phase in Europe where those anti-democratic mass movements came into being which left their stamp in such a striking way on the history of the 20th century.

In short: if one wants to grasp the main tendencies of the 20th century in Europe, modernization theory conceived as a normative postulate is not so helpful. It gets more interesting once we see the category of modernity not through a normative lens but more empirically. And not as a series of ordered steps down the road to prosperity, but rather as an experiment with an open end.

3. The Turn of the Century as Pandora's Box

Recently, Jürgen Osterhammel termed the decades from 1840 to 1870 the "early modern era" for continental European development. What he means is that in this period, a great many if not all of the features of developing industrial society had already crystallized: the supplanting of the social estates by market classes had already begun, the first industrial core zones had come into being, elements of a free capital market were forming, there was a rise in both popular mass education and higher education; powerful movements of migration

were under way, especially across the oceans, and also as a reaction to mounting demographic changes.

But all these developments were limited – aside from Great Britain, where these processes had begun 40 years earlier – to relatively few regions and only small segments of society in Western and Central Europe, and still marked by striking regional differences. This did not change until the last two decades of the 19th century, especially from about 1890 on, and again with great regional differences. The 25 years before World War One can be seen as a phase of intensive change – unprecedented in degree and tempo – which swept up substantial parts of the European societies in a direct way, and impacted indirectly on most other societies. This had long-term consequences that lasted until the last third of the 20th century.

The new element compared with previous decades was that the tendencies inherent in modern industrial society now were not limited in the most developed countries to specific groups and only some regions, but that life of nearly all the population in these countries changed. Mass life and life conditions were transformed as a result of the processes of advanced industrialization, urbanization and mass emigration, comprehensive technologization and rationalization of nearly all areas of life, the application of science to all spheres, and especially the triumphal advance of the natural sciences, which competed with religion by dint of their comprehensive model of explaining the universe. Finally, there was the transformative emergence of mass culture and a mass public sphere. And all this took place within the course of a generation, and more fundamentally than ever before in history. For the period that begins here and shapes the 20th century, I use the concept of ‘advanced’ or ‘high’ modernity.

This dynamism of change centered on the economically advanced countries of Central and Western Europe. In the countries more to the East and South, agricultural structures predominated by far, and still do today. Yet the pull of the processes of modernization in the large industrialized countries also changed in the long term the societies of the periphery of the continent in lasting ways, by creating structures of increasing dependence on the industrial states, or by demonstratively distancing themselves from the industrial West. But in particular, the great political mass movements coming from the industrialized states had a lasting impact on the less developed countries and economies, leaving their mark on the political map, often fused in hybridity with regionally specific traditions, both on the right and left.

The most evident and often recurrent distinctive feature was the exceptional rapidity of economic, social and cultural changes in the decades around 1900. The mounting loss of traditional religious orientations, the migration from the countryside to the towns and cities, the rapid changes in gender and generational roles, the formation of the mass working class, the destruction of the inherited social hierarchies, as well as the extraordinary progress in technology, science, medicine – an advance which fascinated one and all – took place within a span of less than 30 years. It exposed the people to a dynamism of change that was

unprecedented in power and scope, and was often perceived as a shock wave. Within the span of one generation, it contrasted traditional ways of life in largely agrarian and small-town contexts with the urban and bureaucratically organized industrial society.

The intensity and dynamism of these changes confronted human beings with enormous challenges. The political, social and cultural movements in subsequent decades, which appeared at times with intense radicalism, can best be understood as attempts to react and respond to these challenges. Those new challenges were perceived as unprecedented progress, and at the same time as a deep, existential crisis of bourgeois society.

So “modernity” as here conceived and applied conceptually to the 20th century is not an ensemble of fixed principles but rather an *open process of transformative dynamism*, triggered and driven by all the extensive changes in science, technology, culture and society in the course of the advance of industrialism in the decades around 1900. The subsequent developments, especially the series of catastrophic political events, the formation of radical mass movements, and the attempts to control events by politicians and economic leaders can be seen as the reactions to this explosion of high modernity, as a kind of challenge and response. The fact that there was no previous experience with these new conditions and their inherent tendencies, no proven traditions or paradigms, explains the violent character of these reactions, which can be understood in a more abstract sense as a process of learning and exploration, the search for new answers.

Answers in the realm of the social question, the problematic character of nation-state and multi-ethnic empires, in the sphere of dealing with new scientific knowledge, in the consequences of a galloping secularization, the confrontation with modern art. In the spheres of law, economy, literature, indeed everywhere, there was a restless activity, a level and intensity of politicization never before seen, and a huge number of political and social experiments. These were all the expression of this feverish search for adequate answers and correct responses to the new avalanche of challenges.

Yet it is characteristic that the contradictions mentioned that inhabited the norms shaping lifeways and life worlds were far less amenable to resolution. They persisted. A whole range of attempts at reform were launched, such as radical experiments in education, new approaches to the family, to sexuality. Indeed, 40 years later these first beginnings were repeatedly revisited and re-appropriated. But such experiments were still limited in scope and impact.

Other modes of behavior characterized the masses: a powerful orientation to tradition, to custom, to family, honor, fatherland and morality. The cultural revival of dimensions of tradition, present in most European societies at the turn of the century, should best be understood as a protective mechanism to counter the veritable tidal wave of changes sweeping over people. Contrary interpretations that view such a mode of self-reinsurance solely as politically motivated, a reactionary rejection of modernity, overlook the extent of the challenges flooding in and engulfing people. And they also overlook the fact of just how widespread, far beyond social and political boundaries, this urge for reinsurance, rooted in

what was traditional and familiar, actually was. The escape into backward-looking utopias of an agrarian state, the escapist modes of esotericism, the search for protection in the bosom of the nation or folk, or in the solidarity halls of the workers' movement – all these were all part of this quest for reinsurance in the maelstrom of high modernity.

Yet it is also evident that in almost all countries, the regulation and codification of ways of living before and after World War One were also rooted in the fears harboured by traditional elites toward the civilizational and cultural effects and fallout of high modernity: the codifying of patriarchal structures, authoritarian dispositions in education, the establishing and rigid finalizing of what was deemed “normal,” enforced by penalties for any deviation at this time, became the emblem of a certain political stance. It desired technical modernity, but fought bitterly against its cultural manifestations, from big city life to women's franchise to the vagaries of modern art. Here we can see how the search for security in what is familiar and the politically motivated defense against innovations that threatened authority began to overlap.

4. Excesses of the Search for Orientation

In the domain of politics, two variants of radical critique crystallized in the confrontation with the self-created new world in the years before World War One. Both proceeded from the assumption that the liberal model of bourgeois society had failed against the background of the dynamism of change in previous decades, and now had to be replaced by a totally new model. In a heavily abstracted formulation, one could say that the rightwing radical counter-model to 1789 was grounded on the principle of biological descent and nationalism, declaring the “folk” (in a cultural and racial definition) and not the individual to be the true “subject” of history. By contrast, the left and later left-radical counter-model was based on the category of social inequality and internationalism, declaring the classes in general and the working class in topical specificity to be the history's *real subject*.

Common to both these views was the conviction that with the help of this set of instruments, they were able not only to explain the phenomena of the crisis of bourgeois society, but to grasp the historical or natural laws underlying these phenomena.

By means of such an ideological comprehensive model and its explanatory power, all problems seemed not only solvable, but *quickly* solvable, if only the corresponding prerequisites were satisfied. The certainty that by participating in such a doctrine of world explanation a person was in harmony with the laws of nature and history imbued political practice later with a distinctive dynamism, but at the same time also with a characteristic blade of ruthlessness and brutality.

In this context, World War One served in every respect as a radicalizing factor. In the intensification of the ideological war between the Central Powers and the Entente, political and cultural principles stood in open confrontation: two grand models of order for the making of the modern world. One was Western, liberal and democratic, oriented to the values of

individualism and mass society. The other was German-Central European in provenience: it wished to hedge in technical modernity, ever more unleashed, by means of concepts of community, order and the priority of the state over the individual. It was skeptical regarding the multiple phenomena of modern culture. These were of course ideological caricatures, in reality the systems were a lot more similar one to the other. But they imbued this war, beyond its Great Power geopolitical interests, with the character of a secular confrontation over the future shaping of the world.

In addition, this first modern mass war outdid anything history had to offer in terms of its brutality, number of victims and intensity of destruction. The explosion of violence transformed civilian life in profound ways. It blurred the boundaries between civilian population and combatants, and thus also between war and peace, and transported violence into the political disputes as well. Because apparently the militarization of politics and society became a proven means for solving civil problems too, and for dealing more generally with modernity and its discontents. That modernity had now emerged in its multiple effects as such a destructive force that it seemed it could only be countered and tamed by total means. In any event, the traditional forms of sociation and political organization appeared to evidently have failed.

That sense of crisis can be diagnosed all over Europe, but it was far stronger and more widespread in the countries that had lost the war than in the victorious Entente. Here, especially in Germany and Austria, and in Russia as well, the rancor of resentment springing from the defeat, felt to be unjust, toward the victorious West merged with an ideologically driven criticism of modernity. Cultural criticism and nationalism, earlier on often separated one from the other, combined in this way and began to generate a powerful dynamism especially in Germany. In that vortex, the reason for defeat seemed to lie in the insidious dominance of the principles imported from the West – liberalism, parliamentarism, democracy, universalism. The folkish right found its first fulcrum here, linking opposition to the political principles of the West with race-biological postulates for a new road forward.

On the left, another radical answer to the crisis of bourgeois societies established itself with the success of the October Revolution. The conviction that Western-style bourgeois society was in decline was nourished both among Bolsheviks and the European right by the perception of the phenomena of crisis in West European societies around the turn of the century. In both camps, there was a firm belief that this crisis was so profound and comprehensive, so radical, that it could only be overcome by revolutionary upheaval of a similar intensity, of the kind which had accompanied the bourgeois and industrial revolutions in the past. That conviction imbued the readiness to unconditional struggle and ruthlessness of purpose with a historical-political patina of urgent legitimacy. During the Great War and the Russian Civil War, it was then generalized by a deep experience of omnipresent and seemingly legitimate violence, as limitations on its application were put away.

Between 1922 and 1939, in three waves engulfing the continent, with the exception of Western and Northern Europe, anti-democratic systems were established virtually

everywhere. Except for the revolutionary Soviet Union born in 1917, these were all rightwing nationalistic regimes. In various West European states as well, the liberal capitalist model came under heavy pressure as the Great Depression deepened. That was especially the case in France, where disputes between the left and increasingly more radical rightwing formations took on new intensity, reaching a first peak in the march of the radical right on the parliament in February 1934. Democracy and the market economy, so it seemed, had little more to offer most European societies on the eve of World War Two. They seemed hopelessly inferior to the models of dictatorship oriented to military organization, and the elimination of the opposition and the public sphere.

Thus, the war launched by Germany in September 1939 was perceived far more than the previous war as a struggle between ideologies, a *Weltanschauungskrieg*. At stake was the way in which industrialized Europe and its partly very young nation-states were to be governed and ordered after the systems of rule and order of the 19th century patently no longer functioned. And after the attempt by the West, subsequent to victory in World War One, to restructure the continent according to the principles of the liberal democracies, capitalism and the multiethnic nation-state, had patently ended in miscarriage.

German National Socialism can be viewed here as the exponential form of radical nationalist movements in Europe, though it far exceeded those movements when it came to chauvinism and the will to wage war, and radical racism. These radical blueprints constituted a counter-model, an ideological antipode to the ideas of 1789 and 1848, the principles of liberalism and human rights, which were conceived as the ideological bedrock of the Western model of civilization. Unlike in the conservative recipes, the notion developed here of a “folkish” new order in Europe grounded on the framework of race, and under German dominance, combines a renunciation of *cultural* modernity with a keen acceptance of *technical and technological* modernity. From this mix there arose the project of an alternative modernity, pitted against liberalism and the priority of the individual, against democracy and equality before the law. But at the same time, it stood for the community of all *Volksgenossen* of the same race or folk, accepting war as a form of the Darwinian struggle for survival, yet grounded on the foundation of industrial expansion, technology and a growth economy, and with no nostalgia to return to a pre-industrial society.

As regimes, National Socialism and Bolshevism thus embodied the alternative to the liberal-capitalist pathway forward to modernity -- not “anti-modern” social formations, but alternative blueprints for the desired New World Order of the modern world. In that blueprint, the liberal triangulation of the free market, the open society and a value-laden universalism was pried apart in a specific way. Both National Socialism and Bolshevism can be conceived as compromised answers to the radical dynamism of change that set in with high modernity around the fin de siècle.

The victory of the anti-Hitler Allied coalition put an end to one of these two alternatives. Combined with that victory was the total political and moral delegitimizing, extending right on down to today, of the rightwing radical counter- design for society and polity. That model had

not only been responsible for the most horrible of all wars, but also for an unprecedented policy of mass murder on a factory scale. At the same time, it constituted the political refutation of the attempt to advance racism as core social policy and the tendency to biologize the social world.

Simultaneously, the other radical alternative to the liberal system, Soviet communism, had in the meantime gone through a substantial positive reevaluation through its cooperation with the West, its victorious war against Germany, and most especially its devastating losses in the war, although internally the USSR seemed to be a terrible dictatorship akin and comparable to the Nazi regime. The relation of diametric antagonism began to deepen only in the postwar era, when the cooperation between Washington and Moscow mutated into a world-geopolitical and ideological confrontation, which then for more than half a century became the very matrix of global history.

5. Processes of Change in the West

As a result of the victory of the West and its military and economic superiority, especially of the U.S., the principles of democratic-capitalist liberalism were reactivated after World War Two. In the post-war period and especially in the 1950s, they developed across Europe a power of attraction that would have been considered impossible on the war's eve, an astonishing comeback. Initially that sprang from the military victory itself. Even the Germans had to concede the superior fighting power of the American military machine. With regard to the economy, the discrediting of capitalism from before the war still lingered in its wake, but was significantly compensated by the presence of a successful American capitalism. The economic superiority of the US appeared at least to substantiate the ability of capitalism to regenerate itself. However, the economic consequence of the war in most West European countries remained an ensemble of mixed economies, a combining of the free market with state planning, intensified social policy and partial nationalizations. Although since the 1950s the principles of the market had gained ground, the strong presence of state planning was retained in many countries.

With the Marshall Plan, a European coordination of West European reconstruction on the basis of the liberal-democratic system and the free market was imposed from Washington. And the European societies were only happy to accept this in view of the tide of American finance which flowed in as a result. But by the 1950s, unlike the post-war era after World War One, the free market economy and liberal system proved highly stable and successful, offering ever more persons individual advancement, persuading people to disavow all the variants of collective social welfare. In preceding decades in large areas of Europe, liberal capitalism had been considered on the brink of ruin, antiquated, and best replaced by the "more modern" dictatorial systems of the new authoritarian order. Now the liberal option came to prevail as a viable answer to the abiding challenges of modernity.

However, in the West, in many countries with weak democratic traditions, doubtless at the time still the majority, this option was initially limited to institutional structures. Because even

after the military victory of the West, in large segments of the German, French and Italian middle class, people continued to reject cultural and political modernity, and mass culture and cultural Americanism in particular.

The “return” to old conservative values, the reinstalling of traditional roles and family models, the attempts to restore a safe and sound world in the postwar period, which at times took on an air of the ludicrous, were a common European phenomenon. Its traces were manifest in political philosophy, pulp fiction, new legislation and educational trends. They were however, above all, and in a renewed form, an expression of the profound sense of uncertainty people felt who had lived through decades of upheaval, war, postwar crises and the overwhelming political catastrophes of the 1940s.

In this way, a type of society maintained or revitalized itself which in many respects was actually (re)oriented to the values, yardsticks and models of the turn of the century. There was a strange similarity: in the mid-1950s, social, cultural and legal norms in the relation between the citizen and the state, social models and individuality, elements in spheres such as the family, sexuality, youth and “morality,” class, gender and age-specific role attributions, educational opportunities, work ethos and a lot more corresponded to a high degree more to the models developed in the decades prior to World War One than to the contemporary demands of the rapidly transforming West European societies after 1945.

At the same time, new elements gained in importance. In particular, the increasingly pronounced lifestyles oriented to individualism and consumerism exerted an enormous popular magnetic attraction. They proved far more alluring than the variants of a collectivistic organization of everyday life, which now came to be regarded ever more as anachronistic and dysfunctional – not only in the post-fascist states, but soon also in the societies of the Eastern bloc.

But dramatic changes did not occur here until the economic upsurge in the individual economies in Western Europe during post-war period in different countries had created an adequate level of social stability for the average citizen. Only then did the contradictions come to the fore of perception between the developed industrial societies and the traditional norms and ways of behavior which had shaped them. They gave rise to an ever more important public discussion about the necessity for change.

Thus, from the 1960s on, a need arose in the West European countries for a reorientation of lifeways, geared to the conditions of developed modernity. Extending beyond the level of the nation-state, a profound change and shift was crystallizing in norms and ways of living. It gained traction with astonishing speed, and came to be ever more accepted, though over long phases it clashed with more traditional value patterns. One may think here of developments such as the fast spreading youth culture oriented to consumption and leisure, the increasing acceptance of other cultures and of cultural diversity, the crystallization and gradual development of a culture of public discussion of contested issues, an “emancipation movement” along a broad front which began to question traditional hierarchies. Or one may mention the developments toward more intensive participation within and outside the

institutions of parliamentary government and the parties. At the same time, fundamental changes were under way in the relation between the sexes, the decline in particular of church-based norms regulating sexuality and family life, and of styles and aims of education. All this linked with a questioning of arbitrary modes of authority.

In the socialist dictatorships in Central and Eastern Europe, the existing economic and social structures tended to avoid such questions, but in actuality this only meant their postponement. While new developments came to pass in the Western societies which attenuated the bonds extending back to the challenges of the turn of the century, the antagonism of the social question had in a sense been frozen in the countries of the Eastern bloc, and all of politics was oriented to that core element. Beginning in the 1970s, a lack of flexibility and meager economic success, and the rising attractiveness of the West, led to profound crises and the first phenomena of the collapse of the system, which then culminated in 1990. Thus, the collapse of Soviet-style socialism around 1990 can be interpreted in this context as the demise of the radical reactions to the crisis in bourgeois society since the beginning of the century, and the triumph of the Western society of consumerism and civil society. The latter was a political and economic model the liberalized democracies had developed into over the course of the post-war decades.

But it would be mistaken to see this process of transformation solely in the context of economic functionality and the rationalizing of everyday life. Rather it becomes evident that people had required a whole age of man in order to experience and ingest the conditions and limits of life in the societies of high modernity, to learn these successively, and ultimately to accept them. At the century's turn, societies had confronted the profound changes then occurring in their life without concepts of how to deal with these processes confirmed by experience. Three generations were needed to develop adequate strategies to adapt and function, within a constant and in part catastrophic procedure of trial-and-error – both in the sphere of political and administrative guidance and regulation, and in the realm of patterns of living and their norms.

The Western societies changed in the 1950s and 60s, undergoing a process of liberalization and internal democratization. At the same time, the process was an adaptation to the burgeoning consumer society, and contained extraordinarily powerful forces of attraction, generating allegiance. In the framework sketched here, I see these transformations primarily as an expression of that successive learning process in dealing with modernity that, after about 70 years, had finally generated a model that almost all West European societies were approaching, in an astonishingly parallel way, becoming ever more similar one to the other. This was a specific balanced mix of the liberal and social market economy, of state concern for public welfare and private risk-taking, of parliamentary democracy and party-based structure, tradition and cultural modernity, of individualism and communal structures, natural autonomy and supranational ties, extending all the way to the EU. It seemed that the really big problems, which had been in the flame of controversy since the century's turn, had now largely been solved -- both the social question and the national one, the problem of what polity, what economic order and what cultural orientation.

6. The End of High Modernity and the Beginning of the Present

The juncture when there was widespread consensus about this model in Western Europe lay in the 1970s, when even the conservatives opted to accept political and cultural modernity, and the left largely abandoned the radical alternative of centrally planned socialism. Yet precisely at this point, when the answers that had been found to the challenges of high modernity had largely gained acceptance, the foundations of doing business and capitalist-industrial economy began to change. The unchallenged position of industrial mass production as the foundation of the developed societies began to erode as demand for mass-produced industrial goods from the coal and steel industry was largely satisfied, and oil had replaced coal. Moreover, countries with much lower wages were in a much better position to produce products with simpler technologies far cheaper than the Europeans could.

After the great challenges at the turn of the century had largely been mastered, new problems reared their heads. Characteristic of these spillovers was that in almost all cases they were unintended consequences of industrialism. The destruction of nature in the course of industrialization had taken on alarming dimensions. In the face of supranational pacts and confederations and the incipient globalization of the flows of capital and goods, the nation-state lost a portion of its importance as a regulating body. The main problems now were the effects of the internal European waves of migration, then the global currents of migrant workers, changing gender roles and the increasing excessive burden on state welfare and social services. The East-West confrontation lost some of its old edge and efforts began in the Eastern bloc countries for better living conditions, better options for consumerism, more individual planning of one's life, greater restrictions on interventionism by the state. These contributed to the eventual downfall of the Soviet system, because the socialist society as well was under interrogation: what did it do for the life of the individual citizens? It was no longer measured in terms of a yardstick of future visions.

So if we view the decades since the consolidation of large-scale industrialization at the end of the 19th century as a phase of rapid change of European societies, in which in all spheres there was a repeated search for appropriate strategies for dealing with the new challenges – and confronting them in a dramatic and often exceptionally violent way -- then the 1970s could be termed the end of this phase that I have termed high modernity, and wish here to distinguish from previous and following decades.

Something new has emerged in the years since, which cannot be labeled *post-modernity*, because the successful answers achieved with such difficulty to the questions that arose a century ago still retain their validity in most spheres. On the contrary, the liberal, social, parliamentary Western democracies have proven to be so viable, successful and attractive that there was no question for the new societies that emerged from the yoke of communism after 1990 as to what model they wished to aspire to in building their new polities. The concept "*post-industrial*" is likewise not very applicable. Sure, the traditional coal and steel industries with their veritable empires of mass industrial labor have largely lost their

importance. Yet even in the West European societies, more than 30 percent of those employed are still in the industrial sector. Moreover, the modern IT and biochemical industries offer entirely new perspectives. Yet because starting around 1975 in most European economies, there was a clear rise in the GDP going hand in hand with an increase in the number of unemployed, the old bond between large-scale industry and mass prosperity has apparently been severed.

Ulrich Beck introduced the term “second modernity” for the period since the 1970s, which I can adopt in the absence of more precise alternatives, precisely because its content is still not defined. On the other hand: since the Enlightenment there have been a number of clearly distinct phases of modernity. And if we believe that the end of high modernity marks the beginning of a new phase, then it is certainly not a “second modernity.” In any event, we historians still cannot clearly discern its epoch-shaping contours, and so we should be careful to define it too hastily.

Since the dramatic events in the years around 1989, the political contours are hard to make out. But the major differences with the decades from 1900 to 1970 are in the main economic, social and cultural. The phase of high modernity was characterized economically by the hegemony of industrialism, which left its stamp on the economy through the primacy of coal and steel, and impacted on society through the dominance of the semi-skilled and non-skilled mass worker. Cultural orientations were characterized by the contradictions springing from this: the dominance of mass society, orientation to the principles of progress, the dynamism of changes in ways of life and norms – and the counter-reactions: orientation to tradition, the critique of modernity, the formation of radical counter-models and blueprints for living on the left and right.

The cultural movement of post-modernity in the 1970s was a first sign that something very fundamental was in flux, and like so often, change was first registered in the realm of art and literature. Postmodernism, in this more narrow sense, broke in particular with all orientation to a clear goal, a linear sequence of steps building one on the next and geared to a telos, a final end: growth in the GDP, improvement in living conditions, clarity and explicitness in designs for the future. That was contrasted with simultaneity and a multiplicity of models. In the context of this multiplicity, the dedication and enthusiasm of political commitment and engagement withered. And with that the future-certain radicalism of the exponents of those alternative models on the left and right from the period before and after World War One which have significantly shaped the past century in such a striking and often terrible way.

The fact that the Western, or more precisely West European model, gained the upper hand after 1990 as a compass for the new post-communist societies in Europe, with so little friction and so quickly, shows on the one hand how much this model, with its checks and balances in the sphere of politics, the economy, society and culture, had developed springing from the experiences of the 20th century. On the other hand it shows, how much it seemed in keeping with human needs. With this dominance, it is likely that it has also reached its peak, in a mode of self-encapsulation, closing itself off to the outside, a phenomenon associated with

the name of Schengen, the Schengen agreement. Here is a model which functions only as an exclusive club privileging the societies of the EU, and is endangered in its very substance by the rising onslaught from regions to Europe's East and South. Something similar is present in the climatic effects of excessive industrialism and its spillovers, now spreading over China, India and much of the rest of the globe, engendering serious fears about the future of the planet. Likewise, the old political dichotomy of the Cold War can also be clearly seen in retrospect as a military "armoring," as it were, of the regional conflicts and the world. Such heavily militarized conflicts have been increasing in number and importance everywhere since 1990, because they are no longer restrained by fears about the ultimate atomic catastrophe.

The more expansive historical models of explanation become, the further they extend their reach and perimeter, the more we find that specifics, differences, temporal and spatial special developments are left out and disregarded. It is easy to move from the perspective of individual national histories – say British, Finnish or even German – and develop innumerable counter-examples which falsify one or more aspects of the model I've briefly sketched here. We may ask: what advantages lie in an approach which sees the politically so deeply furrowed years between 1890 and 1970 as a single historical unit? Above all else, I would contend in closing, it holds out the possibility to relate the very diverse individual developments in economy, politics, society and culture one to the other, and to work out the interconnections between the two world wars, the great totalitarian movements, the first and second half of the century. And it is able to offer a usable platform for comparing the seemingly so diverse national histories in Europe in the 20th century, without having to play down the specifics in the history of the individual countries under the pressure of theoretical explicitness. If only for that reason, that would represent a substantial step forward.

Translated from the German by Bill Templer