

# PLURAL MODERNITY

## Changing Modern Institutional Forms—Disciplines and Nation-States

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**Abstract:** The article begins with the assumption that modernity is undergoing a profound change. The focus is on the structural transformation of two typical modern institutional regimes: the academic discipline and the territorial nation-state. Their demise as the predominant institutional forms in the realms of science and politics signals the end of the modern project—or at least the need for its profound redefinition. It is suggested that such a redefinition entails a radical conceptual shift in the social sciences and that the meta-theoretical expression of this shift can be designated as ‘dialogical pluralism’. At a theoretical level, both modernization theories and the recent program of ‘multiple modernities’ are rejected. A plural modernity, with several distinct varieties, seems a more promising perspective.

**Keywords:** academic disciplines, dialogical pluralism, Habermas, Honneth, multiple modernities, nation-state, performance

Like our predecessors, we are faced today with a central challenge. This challenge or problematic can be experienced on at least two different levels. At an epistemological level, we join our voices to those claiming that we are living in a post-disciplinary age. Science today is increasingly organized and performed through inter- and sometimes transdisciplinary projects and networks (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2001). At a political level, a similar trend away from the modern institutional political form par excellence, the territorial nation-state, has been subject to detailed analysis for at least a generation. The challenge confronting us today is that these two modern institutional forms, academic disciplines and nation-states, no longer enjoy the overwhelming dominance that they possessed for most of the last two centuries, especially in Western Europe and the United States. The reason is that modernity is currently



undergoing a dramatic and radical shift. This presents a particularly daunting challenge for sociology, a discipline born out of modernity whose conceptual apparatus is inextricably associated with the territorial nation-state. In the terminology of the discipline, 'societies' refer to national communities, 'social classes' to segments of those national communities, and 'social actors' to modern individual selves. How is sociology, itself a product of modernity, to cope with this epochal change?<sup>1</sup>

Our response to this challenge acknowledges the institutional resilience of these two modern forms while insisting on the need to account for new organizational structures and dynamics in both realms. Such emerging organizational forms and patterns require both theoretical and empirical analysis. In what follows, we try to provide the first steps toward the theoretical treatment of this problem. Before doing so, some words on the organization of this article, which is arranged in four parts, are in order. The first part frames our epistemological discussion within the larger debate on modernity. In particular, we identify three major problematics that are said to be constitutive of the modern condition. In the second part, we emphasize the need to avoid a monist and excessively coherent conception of modernity. The tendency in that direction can be found more often among sociologists, who often conceive of sociology and modernity as twin projects. The third part is devoted to a brief presentation and discussion of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, one of the most influential critical theoretical proposals available today. Honneth's non-foundationalist orientation will be used to exemplify our meta-theoretical thesis on an epistemological level. The fourth and final part turns to the political realm and briefly illustrates our thesis with a performative conception of citizenship. Both examples ('problem solving on the move' and 'performative citizenship') hinge upon the notion of performance. This concept is more familiar among anthropologists than sociologists or political scientists, but it is one that we believe can be productively articulated with a 'dialogical pluralist' meta-theoretical framework.

What is meant by that? Briefly, 'dialogical pluralism' refers to a meta-theoretical strategy that sees the history of theory and theory building as different sides of the same coin. In particular, the plurality of theoretical contributions from the past (recent and distant) is to be integrated within theory building as if current practitioners and their predecessors were partners in an imaginary conversation with the goal of solving common problems, or at least problems that share some common features.<sup>2</sup> Two intellectual traditions can be identified as the sources of inspiration for this thesis. First is the historicist methodological orientation of the so-called Cambridge School, whose main figures include Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, and J. G. A. Pocock. Both authors of this article began their careers with doctoral dissertations in which this methodological orientation was applied, even though not uncritically (see Silva 2009a, 2009b; Vieira 2009). Second, the influence of classical American philosophical pragmatism is worth noting, especially John Dewey's conception of science as a problem-solving activity (shared to a large extent by George Herbert Mead). As developed elsewhere, dialogical pluralism has a number of theoretical and methodological implications (Silva 2006). In our work we have explored two

main theoretical proposals (one sociological, the other political) as deriving from this meta-theoretical position: a social theory of the self and a deliberative conception of democracy (see Silva 2002, 2007). Methodologically, our position in the historicism versus presentism debate is closer to the former pole. In particular, we tend to reject the latter's quasi-naturalism and disembodied rationalism in favor of processual and more culturally sensitive approaches. Furthermore, we locate our theoretical reflection squarely within the horizon of modernity. In other words, modernity provides the general background for our work and is one of our chief objects of study (see Silva 2001a, 2001b, 2004).

In this sense, the recent debate on 'multiple modernities' constitutes an important frame of reference for our dialogical pluralism.<sup>3</sup> As will be seen, our position in this debate differs from the claim of Eisenstadt and his followers that there are different modernities, and from neo-modernization theorists, like Volker Schmidt (2006, 2007), for whom the process of functional differentiation (as analyzed by Parsons and Luhmann) still constitutes the best analytical reference to explain the diffusion of modernity. Although we subscribe to Schmidt's notion of 'varieties of modernity', we reject his reliance upon functional differentiation as the dominant pattern of societal development in modern times. As the last two parts of this article will demonstrate, other patterns besides differentiation can be seen operating in the realms of science and democratic politics. The modern institutional forms in these two realms, academic disciplines and nation-states, were developed over the course of several centuries as responses to the functional requirements of modernity. Our claim is that the current stage of modernity's development entails a profound redefinition of these responses. Beginning with the epistemological realm, our main claim is straightforward. Social sciences have to respond to the challenges of global modernity. Foundationalist strategies are increasingly less convincing, given the post-disciplinary nature of our epoch. As a result, theory building can no longer rely upon that sort of strategy and must instead seek alternative forms of justification. 'Problem solving on the move', to paraphrase Michael Gibbons (1994), seems to be a promising solution for this difficulty.

## **On Modernity: Provisional Answers to Inescapable Questions**

We would like to begin by questioning the widespread assumption that social and human sciences require an epistemological foundation. In our view, such foundationalism is misleading. One should not ask, "What are the moral, social, or rational principles upon which human societies are founded?" The later philosophy of Wittgenstein provides ample evidence of why this is so. A word, as Wittgenstein ([1953] 2003) explains in his *Philosophical Investigations*, does not derive its meaning from its link to some unmediated external reality as opposed to its use within a stream of life. If this is true, it follows that philosophical reflection on language cannot take place in a vacuum; rather, we have to be concerned with those traditions, practices, language games, and contexts in which words have a home. If we are interested in the concepts of

justification, of right, of truth, then we must understand them in this contextual, non-foundationalist way.

Instead of recognizing the multifaceted nature of language and its relation to social practices, which inevitably means a good deal of particularity, the craving for generality behind foundationalist proposals leads one to develop complex metaphysical theories in which, as Wittgenstein ([1953] 2003: § 38) puts it, “language goes on holiday.” That is to say, language is detached from the contexts in which it naturally functions and becomes part of a complex theory, which, precisely because it abstracts from particularity, fails to shed light on that particularity. The point is that objectivity, too, is internal to context. There is no context-free standpoint from which we can evaluate the world and social practices. There are no a priori reasons for action, nor any universal epistemological foundations that can be identified independently of the particularities of the context and practice of scientific activity.

The point at issue here is what might be seen as Wittgenstein’s commitment to the view that there is a non-contingent link between the self and the social context of which the self is a part. Derived in part from William James’s influence, Wittgenstein’s insistence on the link between self and society relates centrally to one of the themes we wish to discuss in this article, namely, the extent to which the self in liberal theory is seen as atomized, asocial, and solitary. Central to liberalism is the attempt to solve the problem that arises when ‘essentially solitary individuals’ come together in society. If Wittgenstein’s contention that there can be no logical separation of self from context is true, it follows that a central element of the liberal position is defective. But, it might be asked, why contrast liberal rationalism and the contextualist and non-foundationalist insights of both Wittgenstein and classical American pragmatism?

We would like to suggest that the debate on ‘an epistemology for anthropology’ is clarified once it is framed within the more general debate on the nature of modernity, in which, from its very inception, liberal rationalism has always played a pivotal role. Within what can be called the ‘Western variety of modernity’ (discussed further below), the liberal rationalistic paradigm has been the quasi-hegemonic voice in the debate on science and rationality, selfhood, and democratic politics. In all these broad problematics, liberal rationalism has played a central role. Consider Descartes’ paradigmatic statement that self and context can indeed be separated. In his *Meditations*, Descartes suggests that one can doubt the existence of the external world, the existence of other human beings and even the existence of one’s own body—but not the existence and the contents of one’s own mind. The argument for the denial of this position is found in Wittgenstein’s ([1953] 2003) *Philosophical Investigations* and can be phrased as follows: is it really conceivable to possess the whole range of mental concepts *in the absence* of other people and relationships? This question must be answered negatively, as language is inseparable from rule following, and one cannot follow a private rule because it is not possible discriminate in a purely private way as to whether a rule is being followed or not.

The point we are trying to make is that one can reconstruct common problem areas faced by different generations of social and political theorists (see

Silva 2008: 15). At a fundamental level, the problematics that we struggle with today are the same as those that Wittgenstein coped with half a century ago and that, three centuries before him, Descartes had already tried to come to grips with. It is in this specific sense that one should interpret Habermas's ([1985] 1998: 43) observation that Hegel "is not the first philosopher who belongs to modern times, but he is the first for whom modernity became a problem." What, then, are the basic components of this problem? An attempt to answer this question should start by distinguishing between the basic components of modernity as a problem (what we, following Wagner, may call the 'modern problematics').<sup>4</sup>

The Western variety of modernity can be understood as a discursive field comprehending at least three general problematics, which are as unavoidable as the attempts to answer them are provisional. To understand what it is to be modern entails an explanation of (1) the processes of production of knowledge and control of nature (science), (2) human autonomy (selfhood), and (3) democratic self-rule (politics). Since the end of the eighteenth century, the most successful answers to these central problematics have been developed within a paradigm that one may designate as liberal, rationalist, and individualistic. From this viewpoint, the clear-cut separation between the objective world and the subjective mind of positivism, the disembodied and instrumental self of neo-classical economics and rational choice theories, and the abstract rights-endowed individual of political liberalism are but different aspects of one and the same conception of human beings and their place in the world.

A few words on each one of these problematics are now in order (see Silva 2008: 19–25). Admittedly, the backbone of the modern project relies on science and the principles of the experimental method and on faith in the rational resolution of the problems that have afflicted humankind since times immemorial. This confidence in the combined powers of human reason and the principles of the experimental method—exemplarily illustrated by figures such as Galileo, Bacon, and Newton—is a fundamental component of what it is to be modern. Tradition was to be discarded as an element of a bygone era, something that modern individuals could well do without. The belief that every single aspect of reality was amenable to a scientific explanation—a belief that Weber termed 'rationalization'—distinguishes the modern era. Thus, a tradition of sociological analysis was inaugurated that still today occupies a dominant position in the discipline's discourse on modernity.

In which sense is the second problematic, selfhood, distinctively modern? The relation between identity and modernity is clarified once one bears in mind Claude Lefort's (1988) thesis that the latter entailed, on the one hand, the loss of "markers of certainty" and, on the other, the continual attempts at their recovery. What is at stake here is the fact that the human self acquires a modern configuration or character insofar as it is faced with the constant and unavoidable questioning of its place in the world. This specific modern problematic has been recently scrutinized in a magisterial way by Jerrold Seigel (2005).

Finally, moving to the third fundamental modern problematic, democratic politics, one finds the human effort to reconcile the notions of individual

autonomy and liberty counter-balanced by predictability and certainty. Contrary to what is usually assumed, constitutionalism and the rule of law are not distinctively modern, although they both have developed new forms over the past couple of centuries. What is distinctively modern is the assertion of individual rights and, to a certain extent, the demand for universal social equality. What makes one more modern than the other is the time orientation: while constitutionalism is fundamentally backward looking (one has to refer back to the founding text of the polity, even if one wishes to interpret it in light of current problems), individual rights-based perspectives tend to be future oriented and are therefore distinctively modern.<sup>5</sup> The Grotian-Lockean theory of moral order, from which the doctrine of universal human rights stems, is thus the dominant discursive resource of political modernity, in opposition to which all alternatives define themselves.

### **Modernity: One, Many, or a Plurality?**

Of course, to refer to a phenomenon as complex as modernity is not without problems. The term ‘modernity’ (in the singular) is one of the best illustrations of Gallie’s (1964) theory of ‘essentially contested concepts’. The plurality of meanings encompassed by the expression ‘modernity’ includes, without any pretension to exhaustiveness, an empirical reality amenable to scientific analysis, an epistemological condition, and a temporal framework. In fact, there are good reasons to abandon a singular, monolithic conception of modernity. As Bernard Yack (1997) has recently argued, treating modernity as a coherent and fully integrated unit tends to “fetishize modern thought and experience,” which “once tended to broaden and deepen rebellious and revolutionary sentiments,” while today, “with the collapse of hopes for such a revolution, the fetishism of modernities is much more likely to promote an exaggerated passivity” (ibid.: 130). Moreover, to fetishize modernity is to misrepresent it. Far from acknowledging its huge internal variety and contradictions, to conceive of modernity as a single phenomenon results in a fatally flawed understanding of it.

The risk of fetishizing modernity is particularly acute among sociologists. Ever since Karl Mannheim’s ([1936] 1972: 222) observation that “out of the investigation into the social determination of history arises sociology,” sociologists have been accustomed to conceive of sociology and modernity as twin projects. The foundational narrative of the discipline taught to sociology undergraduates reinforces this idea, year after year. With the emergence of modernity, the scientific conditions for a science of society were made available. In turn, the central object of this new social science was the manifold expressions of the societal shift toward modernization, from mass urbanization and industrialization to the emergence of specifically modern forms of sociability. We are not suggesting, of course, that every sociological analysis of modernity can be criticized for fetishizing it. Most do not. The sociological study of the new forms of association that emerge in modern societies is often nuanced and sensitive enough to the fact that the mutually constitutive entanglement

of 'modern' and 'traditional' elements is many times a central feature of individual trajectories, the collective action of groups and associations and even of national societies. Yet some of the most influential contemporary sociological reflections on modernity do tend to conceive of modernity in an excessively coherent way, as if it constitutes an integrated whole with little or no space for diversity, plurality, and internal divergence and dissent. A case in point is Habermas's conception of modernity as an 'unfinished project'.

In works like *The Theory of Communicative Action* ([1981] 1986) and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* ([1985] 1998), Habermas suggests the outline of a theory of modernity that aims at reconciling the positive (or affirmative) proposals of Talcott Parsons with the critical understanding of modernity of Marx, Horkheimer, and Adorno, as well as with Weber's simultaneously positivistic and critical analysis of this phenomenon. To begin with, it is important to bear in mind that Habermas distinguishes two ways of conceiving of modern societies. On the one hand, one can adopt the perspective of an external observer. The material and institutional reproduction of society is guaranteed by the economy and the bureaucratic state, two social sub-systems that tend to be differentiated under modern conditions and that are governed by the steering media 'money' and 'power', respectively. Habermas uses the concept of 'system' to designate this perspective and associates it with specific types of rationality, namely, strategic and instrumental. On the other hand, this systemic perspective of modern social formations can be complemented with a participant's point of view. Habermas uses the concept of 'life-world' to express this perspective. The largely unquestioned shared experience of all social participants, which includes traditions, culture, and language, becomes increasingly autonomized in modern conditions into three different sub-systems: culture, society, and personality. In these realms, communicative rationality allows for a coordination of human conduct according to the uncoerced force of the best argument.

At this point, it is relevant to emphasize that the system-life-world distinction is itself a modern product. This distinction emerges as the processes of societal rationalization and cultural rationalization gradually take place. Whereas the former process refers to the internal differentiation of the 'system' in the sub-systems of economy and the state, a process of rationalization that led to the hegemony of instrumental rationality in these realms, cultural rationalization designates processes first of differentiation and then of autonomization within the life-world, in particular, in the cultural sub-system. Habermas ([1981] 1986) explains this latter process in the following way: "With science and technology, with autonomous art and the values of expressive self-presentation, with universal legal and moral representations, there emerges a differentiation of *three value spheres, each of which follows its own logic*" (ibid.: 163–164; italics in the original). In other words, what Habermas is suggesting is that when science, art, and politics come to be practiced according to their "own logic," the project of modernity will be completed. In this light, the incoherence between these value spheres is not analyzed as such but rather is viewed as a sign of the incompleteness of the project of modernity. It is

not hard to see the limitations of Habermas's perspective. By presupposing a general movement toward ever greater harmonious coherence, Habermas precludes the possibility that modernity is ultimately compatible with, or might even be defined by, the incoherence between those value spheres (see Yack 1997: 37). There are simply no strong reasons to believe that greater internal coherence might occur as modernity unfolds.

What is at stake here is Habermas's attempt at overcoming the dichotomy that separates contextualism and anti-foundationalism, on the one hand, and transcendentalism, on the other. He does that by means of his theory of communicative action, a simultaneously descriptive-explanatory and normative-critical theory, which is to say that it not only serves as a framework for the systematic integrating of existing and new research programs in sociology and other human sciences, but also is able to account for the pathologies of post-industrial Western societies in such a way as to suggest a redirection rather than an abandonment of the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment (see Knodt 1994: 78). These two facets of Habermas's theoretical project manifest themselves in his distinction between the perspectives of the system and the life-world, between the instrumental and communicative types of action and rationality, and so on. To conceive of modernity in this way signifies an endorsement of a monological perspective that is contradictory to Habermas's own fundamental intentions. It is 'autopoietic' in the sense that it is a self-creating referential system that evades the principle of 'performative contradiction', which he so often uses against his adversaries. As a self-referential system, Habermas's theory of communicative action appears as an effort to control, restrict, and domesticate the irreducible heterogeneity of language games in the name of a single game called 'rational argumentation' whose rules are defined by Habermas himself. From this perspective, the force of Habermas's discourse lies in its ability to reduce complexity by neutralizing potential disturbances. As Knodt (1994: 94) aptly remarks, "In the name of communication and tolerance, Habermas can thus dispense with entire intellectual traditions—the mere presence of self-referential paradox in Nietzsche, Adorno, or Foucault is enough to disqualify them—while at the same time, Habermas's own research programme keeps expanding in its attempt to integrate ever more areas of interdisciplinary inquiry into a coherent whole."

In sum, not only is Habermas's fetishizing conception of an 'unfinished project of modernity' insensitive to the internal diversity of that project (the very usage of the notion of 'project' to refer to modernity being problematic), but it is a particularly inadequate framework in the context of our globalized world. If anything, what we have been experiencing since the last decades of the twentieth century provides ample evidence of the limitations of self-centric cultural conceptions, 'Eurocentrism' being one of the most influent and pervasive. Instead of the monologue suggested by Habermas, we propose a dialogical approach to the history of ideas so that we can learn from all the other partners in dialogue how to respond to the combined challenges of the modern problematics of science, selfhood, and democratic politics. Before moving on to the illustration of this claim, a few words on the recent sociological debate on modernity are in order.



Contrary to Habermas's unfinished project of modernity, and also differently from the postmodernist narrative of the end of modernity (hence ultimately self-defeating), Shmuel Eisenstadt and others have argued that to conceive of multiple modernities is the best way of coping with the irreducible differences between different civilizational interpretations of the modern program. As stated elsewhere, we believe that the plurality of interpretations of modernity suggested by this paradigm is a refreshing and important corrective to the only too common equation of Europeanization with modernization (Silva 2008). Still, the multiple modernities proposal is itself open to criticism. In particular, authors working within this paradigm tend not only to privilege transnational or inter-civilizational comparisons, thus ignoring the regional and local levels of analysis, but also to assume that the differences separating modern societies or civilizations are larger and more significant than those distinguishing modern from traditional ones. As Volker Schmidt (2006: 88) rightly points out, the conception of "multiple modernities suggests homogeneity within civilizations; at least more so than across civilizations." It seems that the multiple modernities paradigm tends to change one kind of fetishizing for another. Whereas the theories of modernization of the 1950s and 1960s are accused of fetishizing Western modernity (more specifically, the variety of modernity developed in the United States after the end of World War II), the multiple modernities alternative can be charged with fetishizing civilizational and national interpretations of modernity at the expense of both smaller analytical levels and previous developmental stages. Schmidt's (2007) neo-modernization alternative presents one important advantage in this regard. It shows great sensitiveness to the empirical confirmation of the theoretical claims on the nature of the processes of modernization. In his view, one could speak of 'varieties of modernity' insofar as one could empirically demonstrate the existence of "coherent patterns of institutional co-variation that systematically separate not only the economies or politics or educational systems etc. of one group of countries from those of others, but the *whole institutional make-up of society across the board* and according to a common, overarching logic that visibly shapes all (important) sub-systems" (ibid.: 224; italics in the original).

The problem with neo-modernization theorists is that they, like their predecessors from the 1950s, still rely on a reductionist analytical framework, and Schmidt is no exception. In his view, functional differentiation is still the dominant and primary pattern of societal development. Although it is laudable, Schmidt's (2007: 210) openness to the possibility that modernity is compatible with a plethora of institutional forms (see also Therborn 2003) is not sufficient to make him sensitive to other patterns of societal development besides functional differentiation. Classic modernization theories and their contemporary neo-modernization followers can thus be said to epitomize what Wagner (2001: 4) has aptly called "modernist" modes of thinking, that is, analytical schemes that confuse possibility with necessity. Even though certain societal developments were made possible by modernity, they are not to be confused with functional requirements of modern societies.

In short, we view both the multiple modernities proposal and the neo-modernization theories as unsatisfactory responses to the question of how to conceive

of modernity today. Our alternative, drawing upon a dialogical pluralist meta-theoretical framework, points instead to a plural modernity, with several organizing societal patterns operating in different institutional realms organized in different regional sub-units that may (following Peter A. Hall's 'varieties of capitalism' approach) be designated as varieties of modernity (Hall and Soskice 2001). As hinted above, within each variety of modernity, institutional realms are associated with general problematics, even though they do not necessarily overlap (e.g., the selfhood problematic cuts across several institutional domains, from schooling to the economic realm). In the case of the two we discuss next, however, they do. In what follows, we focus on the epistemological and scientific realm in order to make two claims: first, that a successful theoretical strategy today is necessarily non-foundationalist, and, second, that such theory-building endeavors take place in an increasingly post-disciplinary context. Let us now see how one can justify these claims.

### **Dialogical Pluralism in Science: The Case of Critical Theory**

How does this work? To help clarify what is in mind, we refer to an example that brings together several generations of critical responses to the liberal rationalistic paradigm, from Hegel to the current generation of Frankfurt's critical theorists. In particular, we refer to Axel Honneth's ([1992] 1996) appropriation of G. H. Mead to supplement and correct Hegel's model of the struggle for recognition. This is not to say that there are no reservations concerning Honneth's interpretation. What we wish to underline here is that the use Honneth, a former student of Habermas and the most recent 'leader' of the Frankfurt School (see Baert and Silva 2009), made of Mead's ideas is an excellent example of the extent to which contemporary social and political theorists can still benefit from a meaningful dialogue with Mead. The conditions for such a dialogue were laid down above: our own research problems will benefit the most from such a dialogue if we complement a non-presentist study of Mead's words with the general problematics they were concerned with.

Honneth's project seems to be consistent with this thesis. His starting question is simple: what explains the emergence of social conflicts? The usual answer, based upon the 'socio-ontological premise' of 'individual self-preservation' shared by the utilitarian rationalistic doctrine founded by Hobbes and Machiavelli and still pursued today by mainstream rational choice theorists, points to self-interested motives: conflicts arise because individuals have conflicting interests—a too 'thin' explanation for the 'thick' issues of identity, allegiance, and citizenship. Honneth's route is different. He follows Hegel and, most importantly for our purposes, Mead's intersubjectivist conception of the self. Drawing on these authors' critical responses to the problematics of modernity, Honneth is able to devise an alternative to the utilitarian perspective, according to which social conflicts arise to a large extent from experiences of disrespect on the part of the individuals in question. How do people come to experience such types of disrespect and enter into conflict with each other

because of them? In Honneth's view, this happens because individuals can have undistorted relations with themselves only if three forms of recognition occur: love, rights, and esteem. If these forms of recognition are not respected, then a feeling of disrespect emerges, potentially leading to social strife. This is the chief insight of one of the latest and most promising normative social theories oriented to the challenges of the politics of identity raised by our increasingly multicultural societies, at least outside the atomistic tradition that goes back to Descartes, Hobbes, and Machiavelli.

Although Honneth's deeply original reconstruction of Hegel's model of the struggle for recognition and his innovative appropriation of Mead's social psychology triggered a lively debate that deserves attention (see Silva 2006), what we wish to call attention to at this point is the extent to which Honneth's project seems to illustrate our argument. Making use of the crucial responses of Hegel and Mead to the central problematics of the Western variety of modernity, Honneth proposes his own *critical* response to the dominant utilitarian tradition of modern social philosophy. Unlike that of Habermas, Honneth's critical proposal does not rely upon a fetishizing conception of modernity and a subsequent modernist interpretive framework. In our view, Honneth's perspective possesses a genuine transcultural character. We refer specifically to his insight that the struggles for recognition that have dominated the political agenda in the last few decades should not be seen as motivated by self-interest (as suggested by the Hobbesian state of nature), but instead regarded as attempts on the part of social actors to establish patterns of reciprocal recognition. In addition, Honneth avoids a foundationalist strategy. His aim is not to uncover general principles upon which human conflict is founded. Instead, Honneth ([2000] 2007) rightly wishes to reconstruct the inner logic of the concrete forms that human conflict assumes in different social spheres, from the private/intimate domain to the realm of work relations (see also Markell 2007).

We would thus like to emphasize the need to complement a historically minded reconstruction of our predecessors with a theoretically sustained examination of the inescapable questions they sought to answer. These are the questions that Simmel ([1900] 1978: 53) seminally described as those that "we have so far been unable either to answer or to dismiss." That these very same questions still motivate much of our work today shows that it is both possible and desirable to learn from those who preceded us, as partners in an imaginary conversation, the best ways to respond to the central problematics of our own times. At the heart of our proposed dialogical pluralism is the insight that theory building and the history of theory are closely related intellectual modes. Faced with the 'inescapable questions' that our condition as moderns imposes on us, we should strive to reconcile the most accomplished responses provided by our predecessors with our own responses to common yet ever-shifting problematics. Such would amount to a meaningful dialogue with all those in similar circumstances, including those who are no longer with us.

Such a meta-theoretical strategy seems particularly suited for the current conditions of the academic system. As several authors have pointed out, after an initial phase in which interdisciplinarity marked the beginning of the end

of the hegemonic reign of disciplines as self-enclosed organizational units, scientific practice today is increasingly dominated by transdisciplinary endeavors (Klein 1990). From research projects that bring together numerous practitioners in different fields to work side by side solving a given problem to large international networks of scientists collaborating in postgraduate programs and research and development initiatives, the scientific landscape today is no longer dominated by academic disciplines. In our view, however, one should be careful in dismissing too readily the organizational function performed by disciplines. Ours might no longer be a 'disciplinary age' per se, but the emerging 'post-disciplinary' era certainly does not preclude a central role for this specific institutional form. As we see it, disciplines still constitute the backbone of scientific practice, and there is no reason to believe they will cease to do so in the future. In order to understand why we believe this to be so, a few comments on the chief organizational patterns of the academic system might be useful.

There are two main methodological and theoretical orientations that can be observed in modern academia (Heilbron 2004). First, there are those who favor a systems theoretical perspective. Their main influence is Reinhart Koselleck, for whom a major societal break occurred between 1750 and 1850. The modern understanding of the word 'discipline' was born in this epoch and expressed a structural transformation of higher learning. These authors claim that the modern academic system is but a sub-system of the more general social system and is subject to the very same functional requirements and organizational patterns. Rudolf Stichweh is a case in point. According to Stichweh's model of functional differentiation, the passage from the old regime to modern society marked the beginning of a process of differentiation in European scholarly institutions. Disciplines are, from this viewpoint, the main institutional form brought about by modernity—an institutional form that came to replace the older, less professionalized clubs, salons, and learned societies. Second, the work of Michel Foucault provides an alternative perspective to the systems theory. Drawing on the French tradition of historical epistemology (in particular, the work of Bachelard and Canguilhem), Foucault (1966) identifies an epistemological break marking the emergence of the modern era. But this epistemological break was not a purely discursive phenomenon: a new institutional form emerged as a correlate of this rupture. Disciplines were born, and through them modern science acquired an extremely efficient institutional structure that enabled the pursuit of the modern project of control to previously unimaginable levels (Foucault 1975).

In recent years, both of these perspectives have been subject to severe criticism. In particular, the image of a sudden break at the end of the eighteenth century, inaugurating an ever more homogeneous yet differentiated modernity, lacks empirical sustainability. As we have seen above, the image of modernity as an ever more coherent monolith underlying the work of both Foucault and the system theorists can be criticized for its fetishized character. In particular, and contrary to what the latter suggest, there is simply no empirical indication that the European academic system was institutionally less heterogeneous before 1800 than afterward—if anything, the opposite seems to be true (Heilbron 2004:

28–29). Furthermore, the history of modern science has plenty of examples of disciplines that evolved according to developmental patterns other than differentiation. Biology is a well-known example of a discipline formed with the logic of synthesis, integrating a number of previously separated domains (botany, zoology, medicine, etc.) into a new and more general science of life. Chemistry, on the other hand, exemplifies how a craft-like practice was upgraded into a fully fledged academic discipline by applying principles of the established sciences (*ibid.*: 36). In short, the logic of differentiation is but one of the operating logics under modern conditions.

Furthermore, as these modern conditions have been rapidly changing in the past few decades, one wonders what might be the most adequate diagnosis of the present situation. There is a growing consensus among sociologists of science that we are living in a post-disciplinary age (Abbott 2001). The general trend of erosion of disciplines as the predominant mode of organization in scientific work, deemed too bureaucratic and rigid to cope with the flexibility requirements of our globalized era, is said to be the chief trait of science at the dawn of the twenty-first century. We subscribe to most aspects of this diagnosis. Specifically, we find very plausible the claim by Michael Gibbons that transdisciplinarity is the emerging disciplinary mode: the production of knowledge is increasingly “oriented towards and driven by problem-solving” (Gibbons et al. 1994: 24; see also Klein et al. 2004). Such a new mode of knowledge production is inherently performative, presupposing a permanent movement back and forth between the fundamental and the applied. In addition, transdisciplinarity expresses a logic not of differentiation but of *de*-differentiation: communicative networks between researchers are increasingly denser, bringing together different actors, modes of doing, and value orientations. Nonetheless, academic disciplines remain the most important institutional form of scientific activity. The problem-solving capability envisaged by Gibbons is simply unthinkable without the training, conceptual and methodological tools, and intellectual traditions that only disciplines are able to provide and guarantee. In order to collaborate in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary project, one must be a practitioner of a certain discipline.

### **Dialogical Pluralism in Democratic Politics: The Case of Citizenship**

If, in the scientific domain, academic disciplines are the modern institutional form, very much the same can be said of the territorial nation-state for the political realm. It should thus not come as a surprise that strikingly similar claims are being made in these two different debates. While in debates on science we are told that we are now living in a post-disciplinary era, an increasing number of political theorists claim that the nation-state is an institutional form of a bygone era. Lurking behind these claims yet again is the work of Foucault. As he showed in the 1970s, the process of state consolidation from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries took place not only at the level of institutions but also, and fundamentally, in the realm of political thought. The state

appeared then, for the first time, as an object with measurable properties, such as its wealth and power, to be studied by political arithmetic, statistics, and political economy. By contrast, medieval and early modern political thought was primarily occupied with cities and their troubled relationship with rising states (Isin 1999: 166). This historical legacy has now been reappropriated by much urban literature. However, trying to draw lessons for post-Westphalian experiences of urban citizenship from pre-Westphalian ones is unwarranted. Underlying this comparative exercise is the belief that our rapidly changing postmodern reality demands conceptual tools that have not been contaminated by modern, state-centered categories. In this light, having recourse to pre-modern conceptual grids appears to be a more promising theoretical strategy.

There are, however, several familiar problems with this sort of strategy. Much as we may feel reassured by historical continuities, the work of the true historian is to be open to the unfamiliarity of the past (Skinner 1969). Looking into the past in search of answers for our problems makes us turn a blind eye to what these problems really are. For instance, the present effects of global corporate capital upon the changing, fluid, and essentially de-territorialized nature of power is unprecedented and lives in a new tension with the 'placedeness' of city politics. This tension explains some current tendencies to urban disengagement and urban de-politicization (Bauman 2003; Castells 1989).

Another point of contention is the dismissal of the state that these proposals presuppose. Very much like the dismissal of academic disciplines, it is unwarranted and premature. States continue to wield important mechanisms that contribute to the shaping of social and economic contexts within their borders. Non-state actors (such as multinational corporations or NGOs) on a par with bodies politic (such as cities, regions, and federations) cannot operate or operate procedurally with a certain degree of fairness without states. Despite all the claims pointing to the growing influence of corporations over world affairs and the life of global cities, the fact remains that corporations have not taken over from states. Corporations need money to be printed and interest rates to be set, while at the same time they need to be regulated. In fact, they need far more regulation than is commonly assumed in order to prevent them from lapsing into sheer criminality or recklessness (Stråth and Skinner 2003: 1–2). If in doubt, just think of the 2008 financial crisis, responsible for the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

In insisting that states still matter, we are not denying that the urban scale of governance has grown in importance in the course of the past couple of decades (Vieira 2008). That much is undoubted. Cities are political arenas where important struggles for citizenship rights are to be fought—first and foremost, the right to the city itself—in the face of observed tendencies of polarization and inequality between social groups, the privatization of public space, and housing market price distortions, to give but a few examples. This right that is owed to city dwellers gives rise to obligations both on their part and on that of the municipal structures governing them (e.g., participatory budgets). However, the literature on the revival of the urban scale of governance suffers from a recurrent limitation. Although it is written against the scalar mode of thinking

that underpins Western modernity, the rescaling alternative it proposes, on the whole, expands rather than moves beyond it. Scalar thought is characterized by assuming exclusive, hierarchical, and ahistorical relationships among different bodies politic, such as those mentioned above, and by concealing their fluid, multiple, and overlapping forms of existence. By suggesting that citizenship rights can be neatly disaggregated in different scales of governance, if possible eliminating the middle layer (i.e., the state), rescaling alternatives reproduce the same logic but now at multiple levels.

Reality is not a neatly stratified set of layers—local, national, global—in which human action acquires a sort of independent character. If one wishes to understand citizenship rights, one cannot simply disaggregate the various types of rights of the modern conception of citizenship and redistribute them according to different levels of governance. While it might be the case that the liberal paradigm privileged one particular level of governance, that is, the state, at the expense of all the others, the alternative is not to disaggregate them into different levels and privilege a new one in turn (e.g., Cohen 1999). That would amount to the subscription of the scalar logic concealed behind the liberal paradigm that one sought to go beyond.

The crux of the matter is that the notion of scale itself is a human construct: it is we who set the boundaries; it is we who define where a city ends and the countryside begins; it is we who distinguish between local, regional, national, and global levels of governance. Those who propose to associate certain levels of governance with the exercise of certain rights seem to forget this. There is no necessary relation between this particular scale and that specific type of right. Our perception of the world as divided into multiple layers is one thing, but to believe that such a perception is the only possible viewpoint, and the only one that represents the world as it is, is another. A better alternative is to conceive of the city as a context for action in which the citizen, the rights that she or he enjoys, the socio-economic background conditions and institutions that guarantee them, the economy that enhances and questions many of them, and the consumer and political culture that transforms them all contribute to define one another. Determining the relative weight of each contribution is an empirical question. But the reach of each particular ‘act of citizenship’ can be fully captured only if one abandons a rigidly stratified logic and sees it as the outcome of a plurality of intersecting factors and as, at the same time, using and traversing, in their concrete embodiments, the inflexible constitution of scales. By rejecting scalar thought, we discard the dominant liberal, rationalistic discursive paradigm on the grounds of its unwarranted abstract and atomistic nature. As stated elsewhere, the rights-endowed individual suggested by liberal political theories, the reductionist self of behaviorism, and the purely instrumental self of Cartesian rationalism are all to be criticized for not paying justice to the worldly and social nature of the self in modern times (Silva 2008). From this perspective, a performative conception of citizenship seems a consistent alternative to the rigid and juridical, liberal rationalist conception.

An example might help us explain what we have in mind. Imagine a young woman protesting in Trafalgar Square against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The

exercise of that particular citizenship right in that public rally in that city at that specific moment in time can be understood only if one conceives it as one such complex interface of factors and scales, in which the performance of that particular act of citizenship incorporates elements from all other dimensions of reality: the woman's right to demonstrate against a decision of her government is state given; her exercise of that right is spatially local, dependent on previous authorization of the local authorities and on her capacity to buy herself out of work (even if only for a couple of hours). Yet the object of the act, as well as its intended reach, is transnational (i.e., to prevent a war elsewhere), as well as national (i.e., to object to a decision of her government: "Not in my name," was the slogan of many of the demonstrators, which implies the sending of British troops). The political values that motivate the woman's action can be more or less global in scope, but, as she incorporates them, they are self-appropriated, and, as she acts, they are being redefined and redefining her. Such a process of incorporation, performance, and redefinition can be grasped only if one supersedes the common trichotomy—citizenship as a legal status; citizenship as identity, belonging, and social status; and citizenship as practice—and avoids placing different rights on different spatial levels. In particular, the performance of any act of citizenship always uses and overflows neat categories, or scales, and what is critical is how these overflows reconstitute citizenship through the struggles of different social groups. It is through the body of the citizen that the citizenship which unites them into a body of citizens (struggling to define the contours of their common fate) comes to life.

## Conclusion

A few words on the implications of the foregoing discussion are now in order. We have distanced ourselves from the Luhmannian functionalist orthodoxy, according to which functional differentiation is the primary and dominant mode of societal development in modern conditions. Empirical analyses show that this is not the case in either the scientific realm or the political domain. We have also rejected the multiple modernities proposal. Again, there are simply not enough theoretical or empirical reasons to support the thesis that modernity should be equated with the nation-state. A plural modernity, with several historically entangled varieties, seems a more convincing portrait. Such a plural modernity encompasses a number of institutional forms, of which we discussed here academic disciplines and territorial nation-states. Contrary to what is suggested by modernization and neo-modernization theorists, however, the process of development of these institutional forms was often guided by a logic other than that of functional differentiation.

We are living today, in science as in democratic politics, in an epoch of profound and rapid redefinition in which modern institutional forms co-exist with new dynamics. Democratic politics today is increasingly post-national politics. International bodies such as the UN, multinational companies, NGOs, and cities are openly contesting the hegemonic status of the nation-state as the sole



bearer of the principle of sovereignty. Likewise, the future of science is more and more associated with transdisciplinary endeavors. In both cases, however, disciplines and nation-states co-exist with novel institutional forms, and patterns of differentiation unfold side by side with patterns of de-differentiation and synthesis. Furthermore, if the notion of performance seems to be useful for conceiving of a notion of citizenship that avoids the pitfalls of scalar thought, it is no less helpful to explain the transdisciplinary flow between disciplines, methods, and theories that characterizes the cutting edge of science today (Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006).

In order to make sense of these developments, the best solution would be to engage the plurality of scientific resources in a productive dialogue, that is, to subscribe to dialogical pluralism.<sup>6</sup> Such a meta-theoretical position can be of use to both sociologists and anthropologists. Hence our answer to the debate that triggered this special issue is that ‘an epistemology for anthropology’ should avoid the search for universal epistemological foundations, a search that is associated with the quasi-naturalistic agenda of liberal rationalism. Joining other social scientists in transdisciplinary projects (like the study of post-national acts of citizenship, as suggested above), anthropologists should focus instead on responding to the central problematics of our time in such a way that, paraphrasing Wittgenstein, the ‘thick’ fabric of culture, sociality, and history does not ‘go on holiday’.

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## Notes

1. A similar question has been posed by Connell (2007). See also Wimmer and Kössler (2006).
2. The rules of engagement in such an imaginary dialogue are laid out in Silva (2008).
3. For discussion on multiple modernities, see, for example, Eisenstadt (2002, 2003), Roniger and Waisman (2002), Therborn (2003), and Yack (1997).
4. Peter Wagner (1994, 2001) distinguishes several modern problematics, including those of science and democratic politics.
5. For a development of this insight, see Yack (1997: 88–109).
6. For a similar viewpoint, see Levine (1995).

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