The trouble with democracy:
political modernity in the twenty-first century

edited by Gerard Rosich and Peter Wagner

Table of contents

Introduction: Re-interpreting political modernity for our time
Gerard Rosich and Peter Wagner

Chapter 1
Autonomy in and between polities
Gerard Rosich

Chapter 2
Rethinking 'modern' democracy: political modernity and constituent power
Andreas Kalyvas

Chapter 3
Democratic surplus and democracy-in-failing:
On ancient and modern self-cancellation of democracy
Nathalie Karagiannis

Chapter 4
Setbacks of Women's Emancipation (Condition, Consequence, Measure and Ruse)
Geneviève Fraisse

Chapter 5
Political modernity, democracy and state-society relations in Latin America: a new socio-historical problématique?
Manuel A. Garretón

Chapter 6
Communitarian cosmopolitanism:
Argentina's recuperated factories, neo-liberal globalization and democratic citizenship
Carlos A. Forment

Chapter 7
Middle classing in Roodepoort: unexpected sites of post-apartheid 'community'
Ivor Chipkin

Chapter 8
Democracy and capitalism: prospects for re-articulation
Peter Wagner

Chapter 9
Political realism and the ethics of activism
Lea Ypi
Chapter 10
The world as we find it: a suggestion for a democratic theory for our times
Tracy B. Strong

Epilogue: The trouble with democracy
Gerard Rosich and Peter Wagner
Introduction:
Re-interpreting Political Modernity for our Time

Gerard Rosich and Peter Wagner

Political modernity—in the sense in which the term is employed in this volume—is based on the commitment to individual and collective self-determination, or, in a more common terminology: to personal freedom and democracy. Our contemporary time may then appear as the heyday of political modernity: never has the commitment to human rights, many of which are rights to freedom, and democracy been as widely diffused across the globe as today; and recent debate and practice even suggests that external actors may have both the right and the responsibility to promote freedom and democracy in regions of the globe where they are not—not yet, as many are inclined to think—fully accepted.

The contributors to this volume share the starting assumption about political modernity, but elaborate here a very different, much more critical angle on the political condition of the present time. Significantly, the modernist presupposition entails that political modernity can attain a coherent, stable form; and the concomitant diagnosis of the present holds that this form has been reached in major parts of the world and is about to be achieved in most others, individualization and democratization being among the most powerful dynamics of our time. In contrast, we maintain that there are strong reasons to assume that the commitments of political modernity are highly ambiguous, that they constitute a field of tensions that, in conceptual terms, is devoid of any inclinations towards stability. Briefly, we employ here a concept of “political modernity” that is based on concise definitions of both “modernity” and “the political”: The modern self-understanding is centrally based on the idea of autonomy, and the concept of the political refers to the search for rules for life in common. Thus the core of the political problématique of modernity is the issue of collective autonomy, of collective self-determination.

Significantly, this modern self-understanding does not lend itself to be translated into any single institutional formula for “modern societies”; in contrast, this self-understanding is open to a variety of interpretations; and the interpretations adopted in a given context will tend to be shaped by the experiences made in that context.

In historical analysis, furthermore, we suggest that political modernity may have achieved a temporary, and far from unproblematic, stability in some parts of the world several decades ago, roughly around 1960, but that this stability is long gone and unlikely to return in any similar form. To characterize the conceptual and empirical agenda of this volume further, let us briefly capture some key features of that historical

---

2 For more detailed discussions, see Peter Wagner, Modernity as Experience and Interpretation (Cambridge: Polity, 2008); Gerard Rosich, “Temptatives sobre la República,” Mirmanda, 6 (2011).
3 We note that Andreas Kalyvas, in chapter 2, operates with a more historical notion of political modernity, situating it in the European political context of what historians call ‘early modern times’. He does so to develop a critical angle on the mainstream European view of the history of political modernity and addresses broader conceptual ramifications in the concluding sections of his chapter.
4 For one account of such “organized modernity,” see Peter Wagner, A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline (London: Routledge, 1994).
moment: At about 1960, the contemporary description of the political situation in terms of co-existing worlds expressed this sense of relative stability and smooth, gradual change. The First World, despite the existence of some authoritarian regimes, was modern and had domestically achieved the institutional combination of personal freedom and inclusive democracy. The Second World of existing socialism had embarked on a different path towards political modernity, indeed claiming to establish a radical alternative, but there were signs of convergence between the First and Second Worlds in the face of functional requirements of modern society. The Third World, in turn, had not yet achieved either political modernity or the functional efficacy of modern society, but it was just somewhat behind on the world-historical trajectory of “modernization and development”, as the jargon of the time had it. Half a century later, the picture could not be more different: the specificity of the Second World has all but disappeared; the societies of the First World move between acute crisis and long-term stagnation or decline; and in the former Third World we allegedly find a combination of “emerging societies” and “failed states”, the logic of which is difficult to decipher. The widespread description of 1960s political modernity as stable and coherent was mirrored in the social and political theory of the time—and this theoretical legacy keeps haunting us and prevents us from capturing the ambiguities inherent in political modernity and from elaborating a compelling diagnosis of political modernity's current state. Adding to the brief description above, let us resume the state of conceptual debate of the time: Within the Western scholarly debates of the 1950s and 1960s, it was widely assumed that modern societies had acquired their ultimate form, which was both normatively and functionally superior to other societies: traditional societies of the past as well as societies that had not succeeded in becoming modern in the present. In particular, modern societies also had endowed themselves with modern political institutions, combining freedom with efficiency. Accordingly, political theory's foremost, if not exclusive, task was to provide the existing political forms with coherent conceptual underpinnings (see below chapter 4, by Charles Mills). In the hegemonic view, political modernity, even though this term was not used at the time, could conceptually be characterized by the following distinct features:

Modern society had led to the creation of political collectivities that had clear boundaries to the outside and intelligible and rather coherent social structures—a “well-ordered society”, to refer to John Rawls's terminology—inside. Under one aspect, first, the form of political modernity is the democratic nation-state, in which the alleged homogeneity of the nation paves the way for the emergence of a general, collective will in popular sovereignty. Sovereignty was seen as the condition for political modernity as collective self-determination in these two senses: the collectivity had to be sufficiently closed and separate from others to master its own fate, on the one hand; and it had to be able to substantively determine its fate through internal communication, deliberation and decision, on the other (for critical discussions, see chapters 1 and 2 below). Under another aspect, second, the form of political modernity is the liberal constitutional state of law, which combines the commitment to individual liberty with constitutional guarantees, thus eternalizing the liberal achievement and limiting the power of potentially tyrannical majorities. In the terms introduced above, this form was

seen as creating the lastingly appropriate balance between individual autonomy and collective autonomy. The individual liberty at issue here was conceptualized as equal freedom. Formal inequality and domination was supposed to be abolished by a stroke of law, overcoming discrimination by gender and race, among other criteria (see chapters 4 and 5).

Significantly, thirdly, this political arrangement was seen as inherently stable and, thus, of lasting duration once it had been successfully established. The stability was to be based on “natural” features, on the one hand, most importantly on the internal homogeneity of the collectivity as grounded in the nation and on the human endowment with reason as a condition for the exercise of individual liberty. On the other hand, this stability also required the appropriate institutional construction, in particular for the balance between individual and collective self-determination and for the organization of representative processes of deliberation from which the common will could truly emerge. While the “natural” features only had to be discovered, the institutional features were to be enshrined in modern constitutions. Whether through discovery or institutional architecture, though, once they were at hand, the correct political principles were not expected to be placed in doubt again (see chapter 3).

Fourthly, the modern polity after the Second World War was also considered to have finally solved the “social question” or “labour question” that had haunted many societies from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century. Until then, political domination of a minority over a majority had often gone along with socio-economic exploitation, not rarely entailing poverty and starvation. Inclusive egalitarian democracy, introduced in a range of countries after the First World War, arguably made any such arrangement untenable. Electoral majorities would claim an end to socio-economic subjection. Though repeatedly interrupted by experiences of authoritarianism and totalitarianism, too often neglected in linear accounts of political history, the democratic welfare state would institutionalize social solidarity by redistributing the surplus generated by the smoothly managed functioning of a market economy (see chapters 6, 7 and 8).

This was the conceptually driven image of political modernity that prevailed by 1960, and it was apparently supported by some evidence from so-called advanced industrial societies, mostly in the West—or as one now increasingly says, the global North. Several of the contributions to this volume, in particular in its first half, aim to demonstrate that this image was misconceived from its beginnings and to uncover the conceptual flaws that underpinned its construction in the first place. In the present, furthermore, it is clear that the sense of certainty that prevailed during the 1960s about the accomplishments of political modernity has disappeared, even though many observers are still at a loss at understanding what has happened in the meantime. To grasp the meaning and significance of the transformations of political modernity since the 1960s is a second objective of this volume, and we can start here with some first summary description.

Over the past half century, there has been an accumulation of political transformations that in their sum have radically reshaped the political condition of our time. The movements for decolonization and national liberation in the “Third World” gained momentum during the 1960s, but they were initially misconceived as merely a step ahead towards the “modernization and development” that the “First World” had already

---

8 For a recent account, focusing on Europe, see Bo Stråth, *Three Utopias of Peace and the Search for a Political Economy*, in preparation.
accomplished. The events in Teheran in 1979, often referred to as the Iranian Revolution, should at the latest have shaken this view. As specific as the Iranian circumstances were, they can now be seen as an opening towards a broader understanding of political possibilities in the present, since then intensified not only by the strengthening of political Islam but also by “emerging” novel political self-understandings reaching from the variety of “progressivist” political majorities in Latin America to the transformation-oriented post-apartheid polity in South Africa to post-communist China.

In turn, the years of intensified protest at the end of the 1960s and during the early 1970s were much more than a short “crisis of governability” from which one could easily return to elite government and citizen apathy as usual. Significantly, though, the protests neither entailed “legitimacy problems” that “late capitalism” would be unable to overcome, as critical theorists maintained at the time. In socio-economic terms, the accommodating response of elites in many Western polities—in contrast to persistence or reinstauration of authoritarian regimes in Latin America, South East Asia and South Africa—restored legitimacy for a moment, but also deepened the fiscal crisis of the Keynesian welfare states. The so-called rise of neo-liberalism is best considered as the next step of elite response to the threat of the withering away of profitable production possibilities. It involved the weakening of protective labour legislation and the attempt to crush trade-union power, as is well known, but also the “structural adjustment policies” in what is now often called the global South and the relocation of major sectors of industrial production from the supposedly “advanced industrial societies” to initially East Asia and now many parts of the globe.

In politico-cultural terms, and despite the intentions of the early protest activists, a major consequence of the movements that started in the 1960s was a weakening of the collective concepts the political use of which had marked the preceding one-and-a-half centuries: nation, class, state, and also society. These collective conventions and regulations that had not only stabilized political modernity temporarily in the West but also contributed to giving meaning to social life. Their dismantling was certainly partly brought about by elites, both through institutional changes and cultural re-significations mainly achieved by large mass-media conglomerates, who saw their power endangered, as discussed in the preceding paragraph. But these conventions and regulations were also under attack by people, mainly by middle classes consolidated precisely by a collective concept such as “the welfare state” and now majoritarian in electoral terms, who experienced them as constraining their liberties and capacities for self-realization.

---


10 The global significance of these protests was captured early by the perceptive but widely misunderstood comparative observer Louis Hartz in *The Founding of New Societies*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964).


13 For an early analysis see Volker Froebel, Jürgen Heinrichs, and Otto Kreye, *The New International Division of Labour: Structural Unemployment in Industrialised Countries and Industrialisation in Developing Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). We are about to prepare a companion volume to this book: David Casassas and Peter Wagner (ed.), *Economic Modernity in the 21st Century*, in preparation, which will discuss politico-economic transformations in more detail than we can do here.

Thus, a double-pronged attack, highly differently motivated, on collective conventions led to the destabilization of the existing form of political modernity. Rather than the conceptually coherent and empirically successful high-point of political modernity, this form turned out to be a temporary phenomenon rooted in a contingent historical constellation. (For further details on the recent transformation of political modernity, see chapter 1 by Gerard Rosich with a focus on the relation between inter- and intra-societal developments, and chapter 6 by Manuel Antonio Garretón with a focus on Latin America.)

The fall of Soviet socialism in the decade after the rise of the first neo-liberal governments to power, first by violent means in Chile, and then by electoral majorities in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, then appears to confirm the de-collectivizing tendency of recent political change. Globalization, seen in connection with the decline of the nation-state, and individualization, seen as the weakening of the capacity for collective action, become the keywords for describing socio-political change during the 1990s. In the conceptual terms introduced above, the frame in which collective self-determination was to be exercised, the nation-state as the epitome of the modern polity, was seen as increasingly lacking the supposedly indivisible sovereignty in relation to other such entities that was at the core of political modernity. And in turn, the citizens, whose commitment to the polity—conceptualized in various ways—was foundational for democracy, may have become better informed and more inclined to make their voices heard, but at the same time they oriented themselves more to individual self-realization than the accomplishment of collective objectives—or so at least much of current socio-political debate in the North has it.

It is in this double light that this book explores the political condition of our time: based on the insight into the fundamental ambiguity within the commitments of political modernity and into the lack of stability of modern political institutions, on the one hand, and on the other, on the observation of an actual unravelling of political arrangements from the 1960s onwards that has radically altered the conditions for political action and the justifications for political institutions over the past few decades. Combining conceptual reflection with historical analysis and empirical observation, this book provides both a rethinking of the time-honoured concepts of political modernity and important elements for assessing the condition of political modernity in and for the 21st century.

The chapters of the book address these issues with variable emphasis. In the first few chapters (chapters 1-5) the critical scrutiny of key concepts of modernity through investigations in the history of political thought prevails: autonomy, sovereignty, constituent power, democracy and its failing, race, gender. A second set of chapters (chapter 6-8) offers selective analyses of current settings for political action as defining experiences for the political modernity of the 21st century, focusing on experiences in the global South: in Latin America and South Africa. Throughout these analyses, political experiences are not seen as cases to be subsumed under existing concepts, but as sites of novel concept-formation, or in other words: of re-interpretations of political modernity. The conceptual criticism and retrieval combined with the focus on political re-interpretations pave the way for exploring the possible directions such re-interpretations may globally take in a third and concluding set of chapters (chapters 9 and 10).

This three-step sequence can also be described in terms of the historico-conceptual

constellation that marks our current time: (1) In Western political thought one had long assumed to have found lasting answers to all key questions of political modernity. (2) But those answers have neither had lasting validity in their regions of origin nor have they been found similarly applicable in other world-regions, where different interpretations have emerged. (3) In the current global constellation it has become clear that no lasting answers exist and that a reconsideration of existing answers is ongoing.

The Constitution of Political Modernity: Challenging the Dominant Interpretations

The analyses in the first half of the volume address all the key questions for which one had long assumed that Western political modernity had found a lasting answer. Gerard Rosich, in chapter 1, challenges the double founding assumption of external boundedness and internal coherence of the modern polity. Starting out from a series of political paradoxes that have emerged since the end of the Second World War, he shows that the autonomy of a polity, a key presupposition for collective self-determination, can be taken for granted neither in terms of the relation to other polities, which are relations of interdependence rather than independence, nor in terms of the internal capacity for decisive political action. Thus, the supposed subject of self-determination—the people, the nation, the citizenry, in different terminologies—needs to make a claim to autonomy in the sense of separate existence and capacity to act while at the same time knowing that neither of the two conditions are fulfilled.

Andreas Kalyvas, in chapter 2, elaborates further on the second aspect of autonomy, the capacity to act collectively, or as a collectivity. Retrieving the history of the concept of sovereignty in European debates, he demonstrates a deep bifurcation in political thought that mostly goes unnoticed because the history of the concept tends to be written from the angle of the “winner”. Standard accounts of political modernity suggest that the concept of state sovereignty emerged in the historical context of the Westphalian system of territorially bounded absolutist states and was effectively transformed into the concept of popular sovereignty at the moment of the French Revolution. This view, significantly, suggests that sovereignty is as absolute after the transformation as it was before and therefore remains within the notion that the sovereign governs the people, separating self-determination from government and creating what has been called the “democratic paradox”.¹⁵ In his nuanced reconstruction, Andreas Kalyvas demonstrates that there has been a conceptual alternative, centered on some notion of constituent power that avoids both democratic regression and paradox, and should be revived to provide for a broader and, in the light of conceptual history, largely alternative view of political modernity.

The combination of “government of the people, by the people, and for the people”, as Abraham Lincoln famously put it in the Gettysburg address, therefore, contains many more complications than are usually acknowledged in the mainstream discourse on political modernity. Nathalie Karagiannis, in chapter 3, addresses the circular nature of such formula by investigating the failing of democracy, such as in the invocation of the state of exception or the rise of totalitarianism. In both of these “modern” political situations, the end of democracy is brought about from within a democratic condition, thus these are cases of the self-cancellation of democracy. By comparing ancient and modern debates about such self-cancellation, Nathalie Karagiannis demonstrates that an understanding of such self-cancellation that goes beyond stating a “paradox” requires a

conceptual distinction between the political and the social. The former is seen to consist in those relations among people and among institutions within the polis that aim at deciding about the polity's fate, and the latter to be those relations among people and among institutions within the polis to which such decisions about the polity's fate apply and which they create (we will return to this distinction below). In democracy, there is always a tension between the political and the social, which brings about change. The cancellation of democracy, in turn, occurs when the social is identified with the political, when this tension is abolished. In contrast to modernist political thought, thus, democracy should be thought of as constitutively unstable, fragile. The aim to stabilize democracy is itself often endangering democracy.

A key component of the conceptual stabilization of political modernity has been the elaboration of an abstract notion of freedom. The idea that the interaction of free individuals would lead to a stable and peaceful political order required not only that such freedom would be equally available to all individuals, but also that these individuals as citizens would abstract from all other differences that exist between them. This has been a key contention of social-contract theory from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke to John Rawls and a fundamental assumption, whether admitted or not, of most conceptualizations of the modern polity. It was acknowledged that some actually existing differences constituted political inequality, but such inequality was seen as discrimination that would be overcome in the historically progressive course of political modernity. The key examples of such discrimination were race and gender, and they were to be overcome by the abolition of slavery, colonial subordination and domestic subservience and to the granting of equal rights to human beings of all skin colours and to women and men alike. Charles Mills and Geneviève Fraisse, in chapters 4 and 5 respectively, take strong issue with such view. Charles Mills starts out from an analysis of dominant accounts of Western political philosophy that demonstrates that thinkers of colour and the issue of colonial, racial discrimination find no place in them. From this observation he moves to considering in detail John Rawls's work and shows that it is indeed the notion of abstract equal freedom which, while being an indispensable cornerstone of the prevailing theoretical edifice of political modernity, makes it impossible to conceptualize the mere possibility of lasting and politically relevant effects of colonial domination. The granting of formal equality, in such view claims to eradicate with one stroke political discrimination, while what the concept of abstract formal equality in effect does is eradicating the possibility of making historical injustice a relevant issue in modern polities.

In a parallel analysis, Geneviève Fraisse discusses the historical exclusion of women from, and persistently reluctant inclusion of women in, political modernity from the angle of the historical temporality of female emancipation. While gender equality in the modern polity was on the agenda from the moment of the French Revolution, it kept being deferred far into the twentieth century, and was then seen as having already taken place, thus neutralizing the possibility of an emancipatory or revolutionary historical event. And even at the current moment when formal gender equality exists in many polities across the globe, political debates often show an asymmetry on gender issues which makes it difficult to conceive of women's emancipation as an objective in its own right, as other than instrumental to the overall benefit of society and polity.

Taken together, these two chapters demonstrate that political modernity has not developed a sufficiently rich conceptualization of equality to adequately include those who, by general admission, have been historically excluded from political participation, women and the colonized, the latter often being defined by the colour of their skin.
Geneviève Fraisse makes an explicit argument about the singularity of women's emancipation, it not being reducible to other forms of inequality and discrimination. Reading her chapter along with Charles Mills's analysis suggests, though, that each discrimination may have its own singularity, and that neither of them can be dealt with by thinking of a mere historical failing of political modernity that can be remedied by the mere granting of formal equality.\textsuperscript{16}

**The Social and the Political**
Without indeed subsuming the singularity of both issues and the ways they have historically been experienced under any overarching concepts, we want to suggest that both of them point to an underlying problématique of political modernity, namely the ways of dealing with material needs under conditions of equality and democracy. The major conceptual and historical point of reference for political modernity before the eighteenth century was the Greek polis, most importantly democratic Athens (as, for instance, taken up by Nathalie Karagiannis in chapter 3).\textsuperscript{17} In the Greek polis, a strong distinction was made between free citizens, who collectively determined the fate of the polity, and other residents, most importantly women and slaves, who took care of material needs. This distinction, which we can see as a version of theorizing the relation between the social (or: the economic) and the political, as suggested by Nathalie Karagiannis, reappeared in European political debates across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The so-called modern political thinkers had male property-owning heads of households in mind when they thought of free citizens of the modern republic, rather than all adult residents, and the conceptual reason for this view was that material independence was seen as a precondition for free and responsible action, as in ancient Athens. Thus, they had to justify why some human beings had to take care of the material needs and others not, normally with help of substantive ideas of the human nature and reason.

After the political revolutions of the late eighteenth century, such justifications were more difficult to sustain.\textsuperscript{18} The democratic political imaginary suggested an institutional transformation towards free and equal universal suffrage, which was rarely accomplished before 1919. Full political inclusion was forced on the elites of the persisting Old Regime by social movements, often in the early twentieth century. When inclusive, equal-suffrage democracy arrived, however, critics of democracy had an easy target because the tension between the idea of independence as a condition for citizenship and the fact that the majority of voters depended on others for their livelihood was not resolved.

Has this tension been resolved since? There is a line of reasoning in the history of socio-political thought that suggests that it has. “Modern” societies are both commercial and democratic societies. A division of social labour exists in them that enhances productivity and wealth, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, makes all members of these societies interdependent with all others, thus creating strong social bonds between them, “organic solidarity”, as Emile Durkheim called this link. This interdependence,

\textsuperscript{16} For a recent discussion, see Achille Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013).

\textsuperscript{17} For a comprehensive recent re-assessment of the Greek democratic experience, see Johann Arnason, Kurt A. Raaflaub, and Peter Wagner (ed.), *The Greek Polis and the Invention of Democracy* (Malden: Wiley and Blackwell, 2013).

well understood, is the new basis for responsible political behaviour, no longer the 
individual property earned through the right to the product of one's own labour. And it is 
common to all members, not limited to a class of property-owners. 
Reviewing the political experiences of the twentieth century, however, the question 
arises whether the interdependence diagnosed by social theory should not rather be seen 
as an asymmetric dependence of some citizens on others. More precisely, it is a situation 
in which a majority depends for their material well-being on the (socio-economic) 
decisions of a minority, all the while this majority among equal citizens in a democracy 
holds the (political) power of calling on the resources owned by the minority. This issue 
was not unknown to the ancient Athenians. Our current vocabulary permits us to see it 
as a tension between a social situation and a political form; more broadly, it raises the 
issue of the social preconditions for democracy to be viable. One might want to argue 
that the welfare states of the twentieth century were a way of arresting the tension 
between the political and the social, securing “mass loyalty” through partial 
redistribution of profits. The current crisis of these welfare states, in turn, suggests to 
review this experience by concluding that, indeed, the tension between a capitalist 
organization of the social and a democratic understanding of the political can be 
counteracted, but always only temporarily and at the cost of narrowing the 
understanding of democracy. In Manuel Antonio Garreton’s brief characterization of the 
Latin American twentieth-century political experiences as the socio-political model of 
national-popular regimes, in chapter 6, we can understand these experiences with their 
authoritarian leanings indeed as a partial arresting of the tension between the social and 
the political that underlies democracy, in Nathalie Karagiannis’s terms.

Experiences of Political Modernity in the Twenty-First Century
Garreton’s analysis then proceeds further by showing that more recent political 
experiences in Latin America reveal an unravelling of the twentieth-century model, a 
disarticulation of its relative coherence, not least in the name of stronger claims to 
democracy. The earlier socio-political matrix relied on a strong notion of the state and 
on related collective concepts such as nation and class that underpinned a relatively 
unproblematic understanding of political action and political change due to the specific 
way of arresting the tension between the social and the political. Currently, no new 
coherence is yet recognizable, and the disarticulation has made effective political action 
much more problematic. At the same time, a both more open and more radical 
understanding of democracy has emerged in which citizen participation is central and 
new forms of collective action are in process of constitution, including novel 
commitments to cultural rights. These reflections suggest to read the recent emergence 
of “progressivist” political majorities, on the one hand, as a specifically Latin American 
transformation of political modernity against the background of the experiences with the 
earlier socio-political model, and on the other, as part of a global process in which the 
tension between the social and the political is rearticulated in novel ways. 
The subsequent chapters 7 and 8, by Carlos A. Forment and Ivor Chipkin respectively, 
demonstrate in more detail how such rearticulation of the tension between the social and 
political looks like in different settings. Carlos Forment analyses novel forms of

---

19 For further conceptual elaboration on this issue, see Nathalie Karagiannis and Peter Wagner, “Varieties of agonism: conflict, the 
common good and the need for synagonism,” Journal of Social Philosophy, vol. 39, no. 3 (fall 2008).
workers' solidarity in response to the consequences of neo-liberal economic policies in Argentina. The financial crisis and the political reaction to it in terms of structural adjustment policies and de-industrialization marked the ways in which the Argentinian version of the national-populist socio-political model, which Manuel Antonio Garretón analyzed in the preceding chapter, disintegrated. On the road to reconstruction, of which current “Kirchnerism” is one project that actually revives national populism under changed conditions, Carlos Forment identifies in the recuperation of bankrupt firms, victims of deindustrialization policies, by the workers themselves a moment of key relevance. Beginning as a defensive strategy in the face of lasting unemployment and loss of dignity as the only alternative, the continuation of production in self-management gains significance beyond the workplace when the practice faces the need for legal underpinnings and political support. The workers who start out by illegally occupying the factories succeed in winning battles at court and gaining political representation. They, thus, contribute to reshaping the politico-juridical self-understanding of Argentinian democracy, a process that is still underway.

Ivor Chipkin, in chapter 8, provides a parallel analysis under the very different socio-political conditions of post-apartheid South Africa. Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has established a stable egalitarian-inclusive democracy, in which national elections have regularly provided a strong majority for the transformation-oriented government alliance of the African National Congress, the national liberation movement, with the South African Communist Party and the trade-union federation COSATU. In socio-economic terms, in contrast, the situation presents itself—and is domestically discussed—in much less favourable terms. Social inequality and unemployment remain very high, and despite the emergence of a “black middle class” the apartheid legacy of segregation and exclusion seems very difficult to overcome in terms of patterns of poverty and inequality. Against this background, Ivor Chipkin analyses the emergence of new forms of urban residence, so-called townhouse complexes, a form of gated community, in the Johannesburg region. These complexes reflect the post-apartheid social situation by virtue of the fact that house-buyers are often members of the new middle class and that they are mixed in terms of the old apartheid racial categories. But they also reflect the post-apartheid political situation, which is marked by insecurity and violence and the lack of enforcement of agreed-upon rules across the whole territory of the polity. Residents opt for a quasi-Hobbesian social contract, which guarantees peace and order within the townhouse complex, and they create new social bonds that may be seen as a crucial underpinning of the egalitarian-inclusive democracy, while at the same time they appear to renounce the prospect of the emergence of a more-than-Hobbesian civil and democratic polity across the whole Republic of South Africa.

These two chapters are much more than empirical case studies. Both Carlos Forment and Ivor Chipkin are very explicit about their view that the interpretation of the phenomena they observe requires the innovative use of existing political concepts and, more than that, that the actors in question may be involved in conceptual re-interpretations that are about to transform political modernity. In particular, they demonstrate that the core commitment of political modernity to collective self-

---

21 The need to recast political concepts in the light of the experiences with political action, focusing on the example of the poor in New Delhi, was in the centre of Veena Das's contribution, titled “The Poor in Political Theory and How To Grow Concepts out of Life,” to the conference “Political modernity in the 21st century: freedom, democracy, solidarity,” held in Barcelona in February 2012 and organized by the European Research Council-funded project “Trajectories of modernity.”
determination, to democracy, is not being realized in linear processes of “democratization”, as much of current political science suggests, and that democracy can never be seen as a lasting accomplishment, as political theory has often aimed to show. Rather, democracy always exists in and through a tension with a socio-historical constellation, which is in need of political interpretation. Relating the conceptual reflections in the first half of this volume, which underlined the general openness of political modernity to a variety of interpretations and its constitutive instability, to the analyses of recent and ongoing socio-historical transformations provided in the subsequent chapters, we have strong reasons to assume that political modernity is currently undergoing a major transformation with yet uncertain outcome. The two final chapters address aspects of the challenge of re-interpretation that we are currently facing.

Re-interpreting Political Modernity for our Time

The analyses of recent political experiences in Latin America and South Africa show that we have moved beyond the unravelling of the political arrangements of the 1960s that we discussed above. There is no longer only weakening of existing political institutions and loss of the capacity for political action as had been the dominant trend over some decades. We witness the emergence of new forms—and new scope—of collective action, of which the Argentinian factory movement is an example, and the political implications of novel social phenomena, of which the South African townhouse movement gives evidence. Furthermore, the dangerous consequences of the preceding loss of political capacity have led to the striving for a new socio-political coherence, the strongest signals of which can be found in current Latin America and also in South Africa, societies of the global South that are not at all “emerging”—they have long been there—but might be politically exemplary for other regions of the globe.

The current condition of political modernity is characterized by a wide gap between that which is necessary and that which is seen as realistically possible—maybe wider than at any time in human history due to the reach of the interaction between all human beings, even though such kind of comparative assertion is always difficult to argue for. This discrepancy is in the background to the debate in political theory between moralists and realists, to which Lea Ypi refers in chapter 9. The question of global social justice is for Lea Ypi the reason to recall this debate, because the current globe is marked by utterly unjustifiable injustice and inequality, largely produced by global connectedness, while at the same time political institutions with capacity for action operate within boundaries and limit claims to justice to the residents within those boundaries. For Tracy B. Strong, in chapter 10, political urgency exists due to the persistence of war and violence that spread all across the twentieth century, combined now with an ever more widely diffused way of life that threatens the very inhabitability of the earth. Social injustice, war and violence, and sustainability are key political issues of the twenty-first century, which are rather clearly recognized as such, but for which neither the conceptual registers for political action nor the political institutions that could effectively address them are even remotely in sight (we return to chapters 9 and 10 below with a view to ways of addressing these issues).

To better grasp the current condition of political modernity, let us recall one more time the theory of political modernity that prevailed by 1960 and its sense of certainty. This theory was modern because it upheld the commitment to human self-determination, individually and collectively, and it declared its renunciation of any external source of authority, in particular its rupture with religion, a key item in secular political theory.
But at the same time, the approach assumed that in combination of freedom and reason the world could be made safe for democracy, for self-determination. Within polities, social life was considered to be well governed and smoothly progressing. And as these polities were largely independent from each other, the relations between them, international relations, only required a minimum of coordination to avoid warfare. As discussed at the outset, the whole conceptual apparatus of political theory was geared towards demonstrating the coherence and stability of the modern polity. This apparatus constituted something like a tradition of political modernity, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida, a recourse for thought and action that is always and unquestionably at hand. However, as we tried to show in this brief introduction, this conceptual apparatus is not safely available any longer, and possibly it has already been failing us for a long time. Hannah Arendt spoke about the political experiences of the early twentieth century, and in particular the First World War, preceded by similar events such as the South African War, as a rupture with tradition. From these experiences onwards, at the latest, no support was any longer available for human beings to lean on when they make collective decisions. She talked about the need to “think without banister”, a formulation taken up by Tracy Strong in his recent book and in his contribution to this volume, and both these authors suggest that this condition has already prevailed across all the twentieth century.

The short-lived and problematic stabilization of political modernity in the decades after the Second World War created the illusion of a new and modern certainty about political matters; and the unravelling of this political arrangement during the past few decades has shown this belief to be an illusion. Thus, we live a situation of urgency without institutions that have the capacity for adequate action and without the conceptual tools that can guide the reconstruction of such institutions. At the same time, the conviction is now much more widespread that it is only human beings themselves who can create these concepts and these institutions, in collective self-determination. The two concluding chapters to this volume explore avenues to deal with this novel constellation of political modernity.

In chapter 9, Lea Ypi discusses the issues of radical disagreement, feasibility of political action, and motives for political action as points of dispute between moralists and realists. In the light of our preceding observations, these issues can simultaneously be seen as marking the contemporary uncertainty about foundations of sound political action. Lea Ypi admits the significance of the issues, but suggests at the same time that the divide between moral necessity and political possibility is not as wide as it is often seen to be. Focusing on matters of global social justice, she re-interprets the controversy in such a way as to sustain a concept of avantgarde agency that takes account of the concerns of both realists and moralists.

22 Significantly, the Cold War was the only major source of uncertainty because the communication between the liberal-capitalist and the socialist world could not entirely be trusted to follow maxims of rationality.
26 Her approach can be fruitfully compared with Alessandro Ferrara's reflections on exemplary action, see his The Force of the Example: Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
Tracy Strong, in chapter 10, defines democratic politics as the attempt to find agreed-upon solutions to the pressing problems a collectivity of human beings is facing, thus returning to the core of our reflections on the concept of political modernity. He briefly sketches both the intellectual and the political trajectory of the twentieth century, the former by radically insisting on the lack of a banister, and the latter by underlining the unprecedented measure of violence, cruelty and activities that endanger human life in general. The absence of a banister suggests that political theory fails when it aims for certainty and timeless solutions. As political problems vary across place and across time, the solutions and the ways to find them will also vary. The political theory of modernity has for too long erred on the side of often fine-tuned but ill-guided conceptual elaboration. The current moment is one of challenge to political concepts that have lost, or about to lose, their context of application. Therefore, the emphasis needs to be placed instead on the analysis of current political experiences and the ways in which they lend themselves to conceptual re-elaboration with a view to addressing urgent current and future political problems.