

Theorizing modernity - understanding the present

The seminar consists of five lectures that aim at providing a comprehensive view on the ways in which the concept of modernity has been discussed in sociology and political philosophy and has been applied to the historical-comparative analysis of specific societies and their transformations.

1 The social and political theories of modernity

The first lecture traces the emergence of the topic of modernity in social and political thought and argues that there has been a crucial divide between, on the one hand, political theories of modernity that emphasize liberty and institutional ways to safeguard it and, on the other, social theories of modernity that focus on the - often unintended - consequences of institutionalizing liberty.

2 Modernity as rationalization

3 Modernity as liberation and emancipation

The second and the third lecture deepen the preceding analysis by distinguishing between approaches that see modernity predominantly in terms of rationalization, that is, as the increase of control over nature, society and self, and others that see modernity in terms of liberation, of freeing the human self from prior constraints to self-realization. These approaches have been in rather indirect debate only for a long time and have mostly been seen as mutually exclusive. Their co-existence has only recently been acknowledged as pointing to a fundamental ambiguity in the modern self-understanding and as permitting a variety of possible interpretations of modernity.

4 Towards a comparative sociology of the varieties of modernity

The fourth lecture takes up the challenge posed by the ways of theorizing as outlined up to this point and aims to translate these insights into tools for a comparative-historical sociology of modernity. These insights will within this lecture be applied to the European experience, with possibly some glimpses at the US and at the Soviet socialist interpretations of modernity.

5 Trajectories of modernity - comparing European and non-European varieties

The final lecture will put the approach towards the analysis of modernity, as elaborated up to this point to a true test by trying to apply it to non-European experiences of modernity in - implicit or explicit - comparison to the European ones. Possible examples for non-European cases for analysis are South Africa and societies in Latin America.

Readings:

Peter Wagner, *A sociology of modernity: liberty and discipline*, London: Routledge, 1994, in particular preface, chapters 1 and 11.

Peter Wagner, *Modernity as experience and interpretation*, Cambridge: Polity, 2008, in particular chapters 1, 6, 10, 12 and 13

Peter Wagner, *From interpretation to civilization – and back*, *European Journal of Social Theory*, forthcoming 2010 (will be distributed electronically to registered participants)

Examination: a 4,000 word essay on a topic within the framework of the seminar, details to be coordinated with the lecturer.