Modernity as a Process of De-Limitations

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Abstract

This article presents some outlines of a new theory of modernity. As distinct from the theories of modernity of the Enlightenment (Habermas) and their critique in the form of theories of power (Foucault, post-colonial philosophies), modernity is described as a complex process of various “de-limitations”, which is set in motion in Renaissance philosophy. Since in antiquity cosmology as well as the geography of the ecumene were each tied to anthropological, ethical and political conceptions respectively, the de-limitation of the cosmos (Cusanus, Copernicus) and the de-limitation of the ecumene by the European naval powers trigger scientific, political and cultural transformations reaching from the upvaluation of insatiable curiosity to the anthropological idea of experimental self-creation (Montaigne) up to the idea of limitless economic growth (Locke). Since rational, power-related and cultural ideas are amalgamated in the different de-limitations, this theory opens up a new perspective on the ambivalences of modernity.

Keywords

theory of modernity – Renaissance philosophy – philosophy of the 17th century – intercultural philosophy

1 Introduction¹

1.1 *Some Reflections on the “Discourse on Modernity”*

Modernity is the subject of a broad spectrum of sciences, in particular historical sciences, aesthetics, the social sciences and cultural studies, and not least philosophy. It is therefore hardly surprising that there is still deep disagreement on key issues concerning “modernity”. Depending on how the essence of modernity is defined we can observe quite different chronologies and theories about the main features of the “modern age”. Indeed, there is not even consensus on the origins or the possible end of modernity. Seen against this background, we have first to ask *how* we can speak philosophically about modernity.

Given the immense variety of divergent interpretations on modernity, I would like to enter into this complex debate not with a certain definition of modernity, for instance the sociological theory of functional differentiation, or with postmodern or de-colonial critiques of “Western” modernity. In order to avoid hasty conceptual fixations of the “essence” of modernity it seems to me more fruitful to take an oblique entry i.e. not via reflections on modernity itself but on the genesis of the *discourse* on modernity in European thought.

According to Reinhard Koselleck, the transoceanic expansion of Europe since the 15th century and the scientific revolution of the 17th century radically broke up the traditional space of experience and the horizon of expectation, establishing a new historical consciousness.² In fact, the discourse on modernity presupposes the dissolution of the Christian theology of history, replaced by the philosophies of history in the so-called “Sattelzeit” (saddle period) from about 1750 to 1850.³ However, the erosion of the traditional theology of history had already started in the 16th century. The violent transoceanic expansion of Europe produced a large number of reports or chronicles of new lands, unknown peoples and reigns outside the *oikumene*, and not all of those could be integrated into the patristic scheme of the four monarchies inspired by the book of Daniel. In order to handle the growing flood of information produced by travelers, navigators and missionaries, Jean Bodin laid the foundations for

1 This article summarises main aspects of Schelkshorn 2016. A previous version of this article was published in German: Schelkshorn 2012.

2 Koselleck 1989; Koselleck 2003.

3 The concept of the “Sattelzeit” was introduced by Reinhard Koselleck in order to describe the transition of early modern age to the definitive constitution of modernity before and after the French Revolution. For a comprehensive and critical discussion see Décultot/Fulda 2016.

a new global historical consciousness.⁴ Deeply impressed by the spectacular extension of geographical knowledge, Francis Bacon devalued the cultural model of Antiquity celebrated by Renaissance thinkers since the 14th century. As Bacon repeatedly emphasised Antiquity represents a childish stage in the history of humanity because of its restricted geographical horizon.⁵ With this reassessment, Bacon instigates a new consciousness, outlining an open future driven forward by permanent scientific progress.⁶ Even his own scientific contributions including the methodological foundations, are only provisional proposals, in order to encourage future comprehensive research.

Due to transoceanic expansion and the rise of modern science, the Christian view of history becomes gradually replaced by the consciousness of a radical open future. In the late 17th century, Protestant historians introduced the concept of a “new age” (*aetas nova*) (Christoph Cellarius).⁷ Due to its semantic indeterminacy, the historical consciousness of living in a new age became a focus of quite different interpretations predating the formulation of theories of progress. To mention only two examples: Under the impression of the spectacular expansion of the great empires, Christoph Hornius interpreted the new age as the restoration of the original unity of humanity at the beginning of the creation.⁸ Giambattista Vico, however, developed a cyclical scheme of three historical periods applied to all cultures of the emerging global society. In Vico’s new science we can already observe the main feature of the discourse, that will later – in our contemporary times – be termed “discourse on modernity” by Foucault and Habermas. Historising all dimensions of human life, including morality, politics and religion Vico’s philosophy confronts the question “what are we today?” Furthermore, Vico already knows that we can discuss this question only in the context of both spatial and temporally widened horizons.⁹ In the 18th century, the theories of progress offered new interpretations of the concept of a new age. Turgot and Condorcet analysed the impact of the modern sciences and the emergence of global market relations on the development of societies still neglected by Vico.¹⁰

4 Bodin 1945, ch. 7: “Refutation of those who postulate four monarchies and the Golden Age”; Grafton 2007, pp. 189–254; Klempt 1960; Fulda 2013.

5 See Bacon 1963, I, pp. 200–202, 278, 290 et seq; II, p. 136 et seq; VI 4, p. 130; VII, p. 64; VIII, pp. 26–28; 103, 116 et seq; XIII, pp. 403 et seq.

6 As Charles Whitney convincingly outlined, the modernity of Bacon’s philosophy lies primarily in its new historical consciousness see Whitney 1986.

7 It was Christoph Cellarius who firstly divided universal history in three parts (*Historia antiqua*, 1685; *Historia medii aevi*, 1688; *Historia nova* 1696); see Jäger 2009, pp. 160 et seq.

8 Klempt 1960, p. 127.

9 Vico 2002.

10 Rohbeck 1987.

Against this background and at this juncture, we are able to situate the discourse on modernity more precisely.

Discourse on modernity inherits the philosophies of history but without metaphysical burdens. However, even the classical philosophies of history are not mere secularizations of Christian theology of history as Karl Löwith assumed. On the contrary, the philosophy of history filled the vacuum left by the erosion of the traditional Christian theology of history,¹¹ a process inaugurated by Christian thinkers themselves since the 16th century. If the discourse on modernity presupposes the consciousness of an open future, then inevitably it also evokes the need for comprehensive interpretations of the past. "The modern age was the first and only age that understood itself as an epoch and, in so doing, simultaneously created the other epochs", noted Hans Blumenberg.¹² The resultant surveys of history are invariably guided by a single question: What is 'new' in the new age?

The diagnosis of the new epoch became a central theme of the major strands of philosophy from the late 18th century onwards.¹³ As Foucault rightly outlined, besides

the traditional philosophical questions: What is the world? What is man? What is truth? What is knowledge? [...] a new pole has been constituted for the activity of philosophizing, and this pole is characterized by the question, the permanent and ever-changing question, 'What are we today?' And that is, I think, the field of the historical reflection on ourselves. Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Nietzsche, Max Weber, Husserl, Heidegger, the *Frankfurterschule*, have tried to answer this question.¹⁴

In contrast to Foucault and Habermas I would like to stress the fact that "Enlightenment" and "progress" were only the first and most significant *interpretations* of the new age, ones already challenged by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century. Therefore, the discourse on modernity is a *dispute* on the legitimacy of "Enlightenment" or "progress" from the outset and one that soon transcended the borders of European culture. Thus, we can observe a broad variety of reflections on modernity in India, China, Japan, and in the Arab region

11 Löwith 1949; Rohbeck 2000, p. 178; Gisi 2007, p. 82; p. 114.

12 Blumenberg 1983, p. 116.

13 Habermas 1987, lecture 1; Taylor 1987, p. 8; Foucault 1984, pp. 32–50.

14 Foucault 1988, p. 145. As is well known Foucault sets the beginning of the discourse on modernity in Kant's "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", Habermas in the philosophy of Hegel. As I have outlined the genesis of the discourse on modernity must be reconstructed within a wider historical horizon.

or in Latin America already in the 19th century. The emerging discourses on modernity both in colonial and postcolonial contexts have, however, brought about exclusions that extend down to the present day.

1.2 *Three Paradigms of the Discourse on Modernity*

Since raising the question “What are we today?” involves a broad spectrum of the philosophies both in Europe and abroad, the emerging global discourse on modernity produced an extreme variety of different views and methodologies. For a preliminary orientation, I would like to highlight three main currents of philosophical self-interpretations of modernity, namely: enlightened, power-theoretical and culturalist theories of modernity.

Firstly, theories of Enlightenment characterize modernity as a cultural challenge for the traditional or religious authorities. Although developing different conceptions of rationality, all theories of Enlightenment, from Kant to Hegel and Marx to Habermas and Rawls, reveal some common aspects: modernity is envisaged as an age distinct from all earlier periods due to its systematic appeal to scientific inquiry and the demand for a rational justification of moral claims and power relations. In spite of all the deficits and anomies in modern societies, theories of Enlightenment hold on to the notion of a principal superiority of modernity vis-à-vis the ancient and medieval ages.

Secondly, in the 19th century, European discourse on modernity is challenged by Nietzsche's fundamental distrust of rationality itself, dismantling the Socratic opposition between reason and power. In the footsteps of Nietzsche's critique of reason, Heidegger, Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as thinkers like Foucault, unmasked the power relations inherent to societal objectifications of instrumental rationality. Heidegger detected a fundamental will towards repressively subjugating nature already in Descartes' *cogito*.¹⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno discerned in Francis Bacon's vision of a new science the unleashed dynamics of power, against both nature and man.¹⁶ For their part, de-colonial theories focus on the violent imperialistic expansion of Europe since the 15th century. As Walter Mignolo has emphatically stressed, colonialism is not a marginal but constitutive feature of modernity.¹⁷

Thirdly, inspired by Herder's philosophy of culture, the historicism of the 19th century inaugurated a serious critique of the universal claims of the Enlightenment. In spite of its expansionist tendency, modernity remains a

¹⁵ Heidegger 1998, pp. 154–168.

¹⁶ Horkheimer/Adorno 2002, p. 2. “Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters.”

¹⁷ Mignolo 2007; see also Quijano 2007, pp. 168–178; Lander 2011.

particular, concretely European cultural reality among other cultures. Today, cultural modernist theories are found above all in certain currents of communitarianism, in postmodern philosophies and in cultural studies. To mention only two examples: While Richard Rorty criticises the rationalistic fundamentalism of theories of Enlightenment, Huntington's "clash of civilizations" offers a vivid and simple example of a culturalist theory of modernity.¹⁸ However, the critique of the universalistic claims of European Enlightenment has attracted great attention outside of Europe, too. For the insight into cultural impregnations of enlightened reason and the revaluation of mythical traditions by Romanticism gave non-European philosophies the opportunity to integrate pre-modern forms of thought, including religious traditions, into the horizon of modern thought. Thus, since the 19th century, Christian, neo-Hindu and Islamic thinkers combine their critique of the materialistic utilitarianism of modernism with a return to spiritual and religious traditions of their own cultures.¹⁹

All three paradigms of discourse on modernity contain serious implications concerning intercultural relations as well as political and economic strategies.

Theories of Enlightenment met with a profound suspicion of Eurocentricism. In fact, if modernity is equated with the occidental process of rationalisation, all cultures are condemned to adopt the European civilisation at least in the long run. In this sense, the Hegelian view on history is still valid in current European theories of modernity, especially in the sociological theories of functional differentiation, in Fukuyama's "end of history", and in a certain form in Habermas' thought as well.²⁰

Power-theoretical accounts of modernity, however, evoke the apocalyptic scenario that it is not irrational deviations but the process of rationalisation itself that is moving humanity towards the precipice of a global disaster. Having disqualified a thousand years of rationalization of the natural and human world, power theories of modernity are faced with the aporia of indicating

18 Rorty 1998, pp. 167–185; Huntington 1996.

19 To give just a few examples I would like to refer to the Russian philosophies of religion (Soloviev, Berdyaev), to neo-Hindu thinkers (Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi) or religious reform in the Islamic world (al-Afhami, Iqbal).

20 See Owen 2002, p. 246: "Supposing that the formal-pragmatic structures of communicative action are universal, and that these structures are functionally reflected in the lifeworld, it does not follow that the logic of the development of these structures in the lifeworld is universal [...] Habermas has asserted the universal validity of this developmental logic without sufficient warrant, he has in effect permitted a Eurocentric bias to step into his theory of social evolution." A similar critique of Habermas was formulated already by Jamme 1991, pp. 148 et seq.

which kind of “reason” could lead humanity out of the global impasse. At this point radical critics of modernity offer only vague terms like “mimesis”, “Verwindung” (“recovery”) from metaphysics, or the idea of an aesthetics of existence (Foucault). Non-European philosophies, however, are in danger of idealizing pre-modern forms of life by identifying “modernity” with the violent excesses of colonialism. Against this background, it is not astonishing that power theories of modernity could be instrumentalized by anti-modernist societal movements for their own political aims. This can take the shape of both left- as well as right-wing authoritarianism.

Culturalist theories of modernity combine their rigorous critique of the universal claims of modern rationality with a strong focus on the objectifications of instrumental reason (capitalist market economy, technocratic administrative state, utilitarian morality). Thus, culturalist philosophies tend to underestimate or even negate the emancipatory achievements of modernity, especially modern science, the ethics of human rights and the democratic constitutional state. Rorty’s commitment to ethnocentrism may have a certain appeal to sceptical Western intellectuals. Given the military, economic and political dominance of the USA and its allies, it is no surprise that Rorty’s modest model, which calls for a non-fundamentalist appraisal of Western values, suddenly seems like subtle cynicism, a point already critically raised by Latin American philosophers.²¹ The religious currents of a culturalist view on modernity, however, tend to reduce modern culture to a materialistic secularism, ignoring the richness of its cultural and moral innovations.

1.3 *A New View on Modernity: Beyond Culturalism and the Dialectics of Enlightenment*

With respect to the problems of the main paradigms in the philosophical discourse on modernity, European philosophy is faced with two tasks: First, European theories of modernity have to de-construct their Eurocentric or even colonialist perspectives, taking their cue from de-colonial and non-European philosophies. Secondly, European views on modernity must be introduced as European contributions to the global dispute about the signature features and future of contemporary world society.

As a consequence of long-standing dialogues with a variety of Latin American philosophies, I was moved to start a comprehensive “re-reading” of the European or Western philosophical interpretations of modernity. The following thesis summarises the main thrust of this endeavour: The signature of modernity results from a complex intermeshing of rational breakthroughs,

²¹ See for instance Dussel 1996, pp. 103–128.

cultural upheavals – in which particularistic and even irrational moments are involved –, and new power relations. In order to describe the amalgamations of rational gains, cultural innovations and power relations, I decided to introduce the meta-category of “de-limitation” (“Entgrenzung”).

As I will argue, this has a number of repercussions: on the one hand, the rational dimensions of modernity, in particular the breakthrough towards a self-reflective reason, that subjects all realms of reality to critical scrutiny, must be defended against culturalist deconstructions. On the other hand, the long tradition of reducing modern discourse monopolistically to a dispute over Enlightenment must also be broken up. The ambivalences of modernity do not spring exclusively from a dialectic of “Enlightenment”. Rejecting the exclusivist alternative of being either for or against “the” Enlightenment I have sought to describe modernity as a multiple process of de-limitations amalgamating both rational breakthroughs and cultural projects. In other words: Modernity is seen both as a spectacular step of mankind into a rational exploration of the natural and human world, *and* as a cultural revolution breaking with millennia-old standards of the “good life”.

More concretely, the evolution of modern culture is determined by two great de-limitations of the ancient worldview, the de-limitation of space initiated by the transoceanic expansion of Europe and the astronomical revolution and the de-limitation of time, which destroyed the mythological views of the Bible on the origins of the earth and the human race. Both de-limitations mark significant milestones on the path to a rational interpretation of the world.

As the Copernican revolution initiated deep cultural changes in European societies, the de-limitation of time evoked by the extended historical horizons of Asian cultures (China, India) and, above all, modern geology was no less dramatic for the self-understanding of the people in early modernity. The “abyss of time”, concretely the growing consciousness that the universe existed millions of years before the emergence of the first humans, destroyed the hitherto unquestioned horizon of meaning of the Christian doctrine of creation, in which cosmic and human events were integrated in a homogeneous conception of history.²²

The de-limitations of the spatio-temporal horizons of the dominant Ancient and Medieval worldview have triggered a host of de-limitations in other fields of human life, especially in ethics, politics and economics, that then resulted in the idea of unlimited societal progress in the 18th century. In order to distinguish the rational, cultural and even irrational elements inherent in the modern theories of progress, we have to take a step back to the Renaissance

²² Rossi 1984; Oldroyd 1996.

philosophies where we can analyse three spectacular de-limitations *in statu nascendi*.²³ Firstly, the idea of an infinite universe; secondly, the new anthropology of self-creation; and thirdly, the transcendence of the geographical and political horizon of the *oikumene*. After having evoked cultural changes already in the Renaissance, the dialectic of de-limitations offers a new view on the sociological theory of functional differentiation. From Max Weber to Habermas, value spheres and subsystems of modern societies are interpreted as objectifications of different types of rationality. However, the codes of the value spheres or sub-systems are not exclusively constituted by types of rationality but by cultural and even irrational elements. The codes of modern science, secular morality, modern economy and the complex idea of a constitutional democratic state based on human rights are not simply social facts for sociological descriptions but subjects of permanent controversial interpretations. In short: Modernity does not follow exclusively the logic of rationalisation.

In the following sketches, I would like to focus on the main de-limitations taking place in Renaissance philosophies. Firstly, the astronomical revolution and its impact on other cultural fields; secondly, the anthropological revolution with its emphatic appreciation of the creative power of human freedom; and thirdly, the de-limitation of the *oikumene* by the transoceanic expansion of European powers that laid the fundament both for the colonial structure of modernity as for a new cosmopolitanism. Against this background, I will describe how the de-limitations of Renaissance thought influenced the philosophical foundations of the emerging subsystems in early modernity, concretely Francis Bacon's vision of modern science and John Locke's justification of a limitless market economy.

2 De-limitations of Space and its Consequences in Renaissance Philosophy

2.1 *The Astronomic Revolution and the Affirmation of Insatiable Curiosity*

Copernican astronomy is one of the main symbols that has strengthened the image of modernity as an age of Enlightenment. Indeed, the destruction of the traditional cosmological worldview had tremendous effects on the intellectual life of early modern Europe, as Pascal's reflections on the infinite universe or Kant's reference to Copernicus in his *Critique of Pure Reason* attest. In order to understand why new astronomical theories could provoke such widespread

23 In this perspective I follow the path of Stephen Toulmin (Toulmin 1990).

cultural and societal changes, we have to take a brief look at the theoretical foundations of the ancient cosmologies.²⁴

The geocentric worldview founded by Plato and Aristotle and complemented by Ptolemy was imbedded in a teleological interpretation of reality as a whole. Geocentric cosmology was thus based on ontological presuppositions as well as empirical data. The central assumption of a limited universe in particular was founded mainly in the ontological presupposition of a perfectly ordered universe. According to Aristotle, the concept of “perfection” is incompatible with the idea of a plurality of worlds (*kosmoi*) caused by a whirl, an idea defended by Democritus, because “that of which there is nothing more to take is not unlimited, but whole or completed (*teleion kai holon*)”.²⁵ Aristotle’s ontology identifies wholeness, completeness and limitation. “And ‘whole’ and ‘complete’, if not absolutely the same, are very closely akin, and nothing is complete (*teleios*) unless it has an end (*telos*); but an end is a limit (*peras*).”²⁶ Limit (*peras*) does not mean restriction or even a barrier that should be overcome, but unsurpassable perfection. The Aristotelean metaphysics implies the assumption that all beings could reach repose in their perfect state (*telos*) as the limit (*peras*) of its movements. By contrast, the unlimited (*apeiron*) represents the imperfect, because it *can* be divided or augmented by endless operations *ad infinitum*.²⁷ Thus, Aristotle’s option for a limited universe follows directly from an ontological presupposition: if the universe is perfect, it must be limited.

The teleological ontology founded not only cosmology; but also all other fields of philosophy, above all epistemology, anthropology, ethics, politics, and economics. Thus Aristotle rejects the unlimited appetites of passions, countering them with an ethics of moderation and self-control. Just as the human thirst for knowledge cannot lose itself in a boundless progression but finds its *telos* in the ultimate ground of all reality (*arche panton*), so the human search for happiness finds its end in *eudaimonia*, understood as the realisation of the highest rational capacities of human beings. Hence, the pursuit of an unlimited accumulation of money is radically criticized because wealth can only be understood as the means for the good life in the sense of *eudaimonia*. In short:

²⁴ See Schelkshorn 2016, pp. 95–162.

²⁵ Aristotle 1959, III 6, 207a8–9.

²⁶ Aristotle 1959, III 6, 207a14–15. For this reason, Aristotle favours the theory of Parmenides against Melissos’ theory of the unlimited being. See Aristotle 1959, III 6, 207a15–17.

²⁷ Aristotle domesticated the *apeiron* originally introduced into Greek thought by Anaximander. The archaic concept of *apeiron* was transformed into the concept of potential infinity and restricted to the fields of mathematics and the division of space.

“for the bad belongs to what is unlimited – as the Pythagoreans used to say by analogy – the good to what is limited”.²⁸

Against this background, it is not astonishing that the astronomic revolution in early modern Europe was initiated by a change to the ontological foundations of the geocentric worldview and not by new empirical observations. At this point, theories of modernity usually refer to the nominalist revolution of late medieval theology (Duns Scotus, Wilhelm von Ockham). In fact, destructing the ancient teleological worldview, nominalism paved the way to empirical research and a new conception of human liberty. Nominalist thought contains, however, deep ambivalences. As is well known, Hans Blumenberg described modernity as the historical reply to the theological absolutism of the late medieval period. More concretely, modern rationality must be understood as an epochal act of human self-assertion in the face of the omnipotence and arbitrariness of the nominalist conception of God.²⁹

Although the importance of nominalism for modern thinking can scarcely be underestimated, the theological absolutism of late medieval nominalism marks nonetheless only *one* path to modernity. Nicholas of Cusa opens another way to modernity through a gentle “recovery” of the teleological worldview inspired by a neo-Platonic philosophy of the absolute: absolute perfection does not converge with limit (*peras*), but with the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*), and this implies the total absence of all thinkable limits. In contrast to neo-Platonic mysticism, however, Nicholas of Cusa then draws a surprising consequence from the philosophy of the absolute. As an explication (*explicatio*) of the absolute, the cosmos itself must be conceived as an infinite universe. Transforming the Aristotelian ontology, Nicholas of Cusa develops the concept of an unbounded and – due to its dependence on the absolute – at the same time finite universe. For Nicholas of Cusa, the universe is thus acentric, the earth is one star amongst others.

Just as the Aristotelean teleological ontology served as the fundament for the different branches of philosophy from cosmology to economics, Nicholas of Cusa’s philosophy of the absolute also provokes profound transformations in other fields of philosophy. The new ontology engenders not only a new cosmology, but also a new epistemology. In face of the infinite universe, Nicholas of Cusa justifies the insatiable pursuit of knowledge, motored by and passing through an endless process of revising conjectures. Thus, Nicholas of Cusa

28 Aristotle 2002, II 6, 1106b30–31. Even Aristotle’s option for the *polis* as the best form of society was supported by the general argument that great reigns of Asia would expand the societal life ad infinitum must be avoided.

29 Blumenberg 1983, pp. 125–228.

challenges both ancient and Christian reservations against curiosity, for insatiability contradicts the ethical ideal of the tranquillity of the soul, accepted by all Hellenistic philosophies, even the Epicureans. Moreover, Roman philosophies problematised the *curiositas* in the name of the duties for the *patria* (Cicero), early Christian thought in the name of the concern of the salvation of the soul (Augustine).³⁰ Nicholas of Cusa thus develops a radical revaluation of insatiable curiosity (*curiositas*) that is one of the main presuppositions of modern science, as Hans Blumenberg has pointed out.³¹

The affirmation of the unlimited thirst for knowledge relativised the traditional reservations about every form of “insatiability” in ancient and medieval thought. For this reason, the appreciation of *curiositas* inevitably had an impact on practical philosophy à la longue. Nonetheless, in the late Middle Ages the ethics of measure and self-perfection were still valid. Two centuries after Nicholas of Cusa, however, the theoretical idea of an endless pursuit of cognition transformed the traditional conception of felicity in European ethics. Hobbes defined felicity as “an unhindered progression to ever-widening goals / restless striving for new goals”,³² Leibniz and Wolff as a striving for ever greater joys or perfections.³³ Thus, the modern process of de-limitation encompassed ethics, too.

2.2 *The De-limitation of Geographical Space and the Foundation of a New Cosmopolitanism*

As well as Copernican astronomy, Enlightenment philosophy celebrated the expeditions of Columbus and Vasco da Gama as breakthroughs to a rational exploration of the world. Indeed, after the outstanding achievements of Greek and Islamic geography, the European voyagers of the 15th and 16th centuries ushered in a new era on humanity's long path towards rationalising its geographical worldviews. For non-European philosophies, however, the transoceanic expansion of Europe laid the foundation for the colonization and enslavement of millions of people in Africa, America and Asia, as Enrique Dussel, the main representative of the Latin American philosophy of liberation, has pointed out in his critique of modernity.³⁴ Indeed, the

30 Bös 1995.

31 See Blumenberg 1983, pp. 227–454. Blumenberg provoked a widespread debate about curiosity in modern thought until now. Daston/Park 1998; Inan 2012.

32 Hobbes 1991, De homine, x, 15.

33 Leibniz 1986, vol. 1, p. 372: “Beatitudo non consistit in summo quodam gradu, sed in perpetuo gaudiorum incremento.” Wolff, 1971, I, §374: “non impeditus progressus ad maiores continuo perfectiones”.

34 See Dussel 2011.

hegemonic order founded by the violent transoceanic expansion of Europe needs to be acknowledged as *one* of the formative features of modernity. However, beyond the dispute between the de-colonial critics and the defenders of the Enlightenment, I want to propose a third view on the significance of the transoceanic expansion of Europe for the genesis and signature features of modernity and analyse the amalgamations of power relations and rational gains.

The violent expansion of the Iberian powers since the 15th century was an important and unprecedented step towards the construction of a global society. Despite the impressive expansions of some pre-modern empires, especially of the Mongols or the Islamic rulers, the great civilisations remained in a certain coexistence. The spectacular expansionist movements between the 16th and 18th century transformed the long-standing panorama of world history. The process of globalization in early modernity, however, was not only inaugurated by European powers. On the contrary, since the 16th century the Ottoman Empire fostered its hegemony in the Near East, Northern Africa and in the south-eastern regions of Europe. The Manchu dynasty doubled the original territory of the Chinese empire during the 17th and 18th century. Russia extended its power to the Pacific. This shows that globality is a constitutive moment of modernity. Never before in human history were all cultures and peoples of the earth connected in a global framework. Globality, with its new power relations, is the result of spectacular imperial expansions of European *and* Asian powers. It was not until the 19th century that Europe gained global hegemony thanks to the industrial revolution.

Faced with the new challenges of global rivalry, both Asian as well as European empires introduced political, economic and cultural reform projects. Insofar philosophies in China, India or Europe reflected the impacts of the emerging globality, we can observe the first anticipations of discourses on modernity during the 17th and early 18th century both in Europe and Asia.

In Europe, the School of Salamanca was the first to reflect on the new global constellation. The Spanish philosophies of the 16th century represent an important step in the genesis of modern thought. Like the astronomic revolution, the de-limitation of the geographical and political space had a deep impact on the cultural life of early modern Europe, evident in the rise of Utopian literature or the breakthrough of an ethnological anthropology, to name just two examples.³⁵ In the following, I will focus only on the question of how

35 See Marina 1998; Pagden 1982.

the transoceanic expansion provoked philosophical foundations for a new cosmopolitanism.³⁶

In order to understand why the voyages of Vasco da Gama and Columbus could change the moral and political ideas of European culture we have to cast a brief look back to ancient and medieval worldviews where geographical assumptions are intimately linked with moral, anthropological and political ideas.³⁷

Since Aristotle, ancient political philosophy is tied to a racist anthropology based on a theory of climate. The polis as the perfect political order can only be realised in a temperate climate zone, especially in Greece, where human beings are endowed with full rational capacities.³⁸ In contrast, the extreme climate zones are regarded as being populated by barbarians with reduced rational capacities. Thus, Aristotle founded the lethal theory of barbarians who are slaves by nature,³⁹ which distorted European political or colonial thought until the 20th century.

It was the achievement of Stoics and Christians to overcome the ethical particularism of classical Greek philosophy. Stoic and Christian authors, however, propagated mainly a spiritual or ethical recognition of the dignity of all human beings founded in the universal law of the cosmos or in monotheistic theology. Therefore, the ancient ethical universalism neglected any political or juridical realisations of the unity of humanity. For instance, both Seneca and Paul pleaded for respect for slaves without demanding the abolition of the institution of slavery. It was Cicero who transformed the abstract or spiritual universalism into a moral vision of the unity of humanity in the proper sense of the word, and this initiated certain juridical improvements for slaves in the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, the cosmopolitanism of Cicero and of later Stoics was still restrained and distorted by the idea of a Roman world empire. Identifying the expansion of the Roman Empire with the spread of civilisation, the conquest of barbarian peoples was not considered as an act of injustice. In spite of all claims for an ethical universalism, the human dignity of the barbarians living outside the Empire or even in the marginal regions of the *oikumene* was still questioned by anthropological arguments based on the climate theory.⁴⁰

36 For the following see Schelkshorn 2016, pp. 205–298; Schelkshorn 2012, pp. 165–188.

37 As is generally known, the classical Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, remained in a crude ethical particularism negating the human dignity of barbarians, slaves and wives.

38 Aristotle 1996, VII 7, 1327b23–33.

39 Aristotle 1996, I 2, 1252b7–9: “[...] that the barbarian and the slave were by nature one”.

40 See Schelkshorn 2016, 238–256.

For this reason, ancient and medieval ethics and politics never overcame two limitations. Firstly, the moral status of the people living on the peripheries of the empire or *oikumene* still remained on a precarious level. Secondly, the overwhelming influence of the Roman idea of world domination inhibited the foundation of a philosophical theory of the law of nations. These two restraints evident in ancient cosmopolitanism supported the shocking justifications of European expansion during the 15th and 16th centuries. While the Christian ideal of the Roman world empire served as a justification for the conquest of the Aztec and Inca kingdoms, the concept of barbarian peoples entwined with notions about climate influences supported the negation of the human dignity of the newly discovered peoples of America and Africa.

In the hour of deepest delusion, however, the germ of a new cosmopolitanism grew in the sixteenth century. Two developments have to be emphasised at this point: First, the transoceanic expeditions destroyed not only the ancient geographical worldviews, but questioned also the ideas about barbarians and monstrous mythical creatures at the margin of the *oikumene*. Second, the violent excesses of the transoceanic expansion triggered a great debate about the moral and juridical justifications of the conquest of America, including the constraints of the Stoic-Christian universalism.

In this context, Francisco de Vitoria lays the foundations for a new, specifically modern cosmopolitanism in his famous lectures *Relectiones De Indis* (*On the American Indians*, 1539).⁴¹ Shocked by the massacres of the Incas, Vitoria totally dismantles all claims to world domination raised by both the emperor and the Pope. In a second step, based on new geographical knowledge Vitoria destroys the theory of the natural slavery of the barbarians and proclaimed the human dignity and land rights of all peoples in all regions of the world. Thus, Vitoria liberates the ethical universalism of Stoic-Christian thought from its two main limitations.

Having eliminated the main restraints of ancient cosmopolitanism, Vitoria goes on to develop the first philosophical theory of a law of nations. Moreover, Vitoria transforms the Aristotelian doctrine of the sociability of human nature, which was focused to the limited community of the *Polis*, into the utopian vision of a communicative world society encompassing all peoples and even all men. Thus, the ultimate aim of Vitoria's *ius gentium* is not an external peace between states, but rather a "natural partnership and communication

41 Francisco de Vitoria 1991, pp. 233–292. Among the huge literature dealing with Vitoria's lectures about the New World and his moral philosophy in general I want to indicate especially the following studies: Pagden 1982, pp. 57–108; Rovira Gaspar 2004; Thumfart 2012; Beneyto/Corti Varela 2017.

(*naturalis societatis et communicationis*)⁴² of all men on earth. The concrete laws of nations proposed by Vitoria, namely the right to travel, to trade, to become a citizen in a foreign country and the like, are founded in the vision of a global society, insofar these rights enable and encourage communication between men around the world.⁴³ Following this line of argumentation, Vitoria proposed a spectacular extension of moral responsibility to the whole of humanity. Every human being is called upon to save innocent people from oppression and murder, regardless of whether the injustice takes place in their own society or in distant countries, even outside their own *oikumene*. Neither the Stoics nor the early Christians had derived such a radical obligation from the idea of the unity of humanity. Thus, Vitoria formulates the first *theoretical* expression of what is called “humanitarian intervention” in current debates.⁴⁴

To sum up: Vitoria's thought is a striking example that supports the interpretation of modernity as a multiple process of de-limitations. On the one hand, inspired by the colonial de-limitation of the *oikumene*, Vitoria develops the first theoretical foundation of a law of nations, marking a rational breakthrough in the evolution of European ethics and political theory. Certainly, the first draft of a philosophical theory of the law of nations in European history contains painful ambivalences. To mention only two aspects: The laws of nation are not the result of intercultural dialogues of negations but founded in a modified version of the Christian doctrine of natural law. Moreover, the right to mission deduced by the vision of global communication is reserved exclusively for Christian religion. As violations of international laws serve for reasons for a just war, Vitoria offers new justifications of colonial expansion, too. On the other hand, by extending the horizon of moral responsibility to the whole of humanity Vitoria's law of nations produces new problems. First, the demand to stop mass murder of innocent people even in remote regions opens the door for new political violence. Since only great powers are able to intervene in other states, the moral idea of humanitarian intervention was often exploited by great empires for their own interests. Second, the ethics of global solidarity run the risk of overburdening the moral capacities of individuals. The extreme de-limitation of moral responsibility has sparked a persistent controversy about the limits of global solidarity in modern philosophies until today, exemplified by the debates between communitarianism and cosmopolitan theories.

42 Vitoria 1991, 1,3; p. 278.

43 Vitoria 1991, 3,1; pp. 278–284.

44 See Vitoria 1991, p. 3, p. 5. This thesis is supported by Cavallar 2002, p. 99.

Vitoria's law of nations is quite a striking phenomenon to illustrate the proposed theory of modernity as a manifold process of de-limitations. Provoked by the de-limitation of the geographical and political horizons of the *oikumene*, Vitoria founded a new cosmopolitanism, which contains rational gains, such as the recognition of the rights of all people and men, and cultural projects, like the vision of a communicative world society based on an extreme de-limitation of moral responsibility, and even justifications of imperial power. From this background, it is not astonishing that Vitoria's law of nations was both greatly appreciated in enlightened theories of modernity and harshly criticised by de-colonial thinkers.⁴⁵ In fact, from the perspective of ancient cosmopolitanism, Vitoria's law of nations appears to be an important breakthrough towards a contractual and juridical global order and even towards the moral idea of global solidarity. From the perspective of the colonial imperialism of the Iberian powers in the 16th century, the ambivalences of Vitoria's cosmopolitanism are quite evident. Thus, Vitoria's law of nations was already criticised for instance by Bartolomé de las Casas or Poma de Ayala. In short, the focus on de-limitations in early modern philosophies opens a more complex approach to Vitoria beyond exclusive and dualistic interpretations.

In addition, Vitoria's law of nations highlights the phenomenon that some de-limitations of early modernity trigger a dialectical dynamic. The cosmopolitan thought founded by Vitoria and continued mainly by Grotius and Kant, was sometimes totally marginalized by the political philosophy of the nation state. In contrast to Vitoria's vision of a peaceful traffic and communication between all peoples, Thomas Hobbes describes international relations as insurmountably conflictive.⁴⁶ The logic of international affairs is the logic of power. According to Hobbes, a peaceful order can only be established within the narrow boundaries of the territorial state.⁴⁷

Since the 19th century, nationalism serves as the ideological fundament of the modern state. Thus, modern political philosophy, as well as real politics itself, are determined by an endless dialectic of the cosmopolitan de-limitations originally inaugurated by Vitoria. Ideas of global responsibility are opposed by ethnocentric moralities, the law of nations by assertions of the absolute sovereignty of the nation state.

45 Dussel 2000, pp. 465–478; Anghie 2005; Fitzmaurice 2017, pp. 77–93.

46 See Hobbes 2005, p. 279: "Concerning the Offices of one Souveraign to another, which are comprehended in that Law, which is commonly called the Law of Nations, I need not say anything in this place; because the Law of Nations, and the Law of Nature [viz. the war all against all], is the same thing."

47 For a comprehensive analysis of Hobbes' political philosophy within the de-limitations of early modernity see Schelkshorn 2016, pp. 461–528.

2.3 *The Anthropological Revolution: Self-Creation in a De-limited World. From Pico della Mirandola to Michel de Montaigne*

In addition to the cosmological and geographical de-limitations, Renaissance philosophy initiated an anthropological revolution that appreciated the creative powers of man. While medieval theology regarded creative power as a privilege of God, Renaissance thinkers attributed the *vis creativa* to human beings as well.⁴⁸ From Petrarch via Ficino, Nicholas of Cusa to Manetti and Pico della Mirandola, we find a great spectrum of descriptions on how the creative powers of men are manifested in human activities, extending from artistic endeavour through to technological achievements and the creation of concepts and languages. According to Nicholas de Cusa, human beings participate in even the divine *creatio ex nihilo*. Just as God creates things out of nothingness, so man creates worlds of concepts and languages out of himself, i.e. from his mind.⁴⁹

Pico della Mirandola, however, applies the *vis creativa* mainly to the creative self-reflexivity of human beings. In contrast to all other creatures that are subjected to a fixed law, it is the freedom of man to give himself the nature he prefers. Pico explicates this idea in his famous *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486). In a literary account of creation Pico lets God speak to man:

Once defined, the nature of all other beings is constrained within the laws We have prescribed for them. But you, constrained by no limits, may determine your nature for yourself, fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer. It will be in your power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Alternatively, you shall have the power, in accordance with the judgement of your soul, to be reborn into the higher orders, those that are divine.⁵⁰

48 See Bouwsma 1993, pp. 25 et seq.: "The possibility of human creativity was one of the more original contributions of the Renaissance to western culture [...] The distinction of the Renaissance lay in the application of these verses [Gen 1, 26f.] to human creativity; the recognition of the radical creativity of god thus pointed to the almost equally radical creativity of his human creatures." The divine privilege of creation (*creare*) is defended by *Thomas Aquinas*, *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 45, a.5 ad 3. For a comprehensive overview about Renaissance anthropology see Trinkaus 1970. For the developments after the classical literature on human dignity see Greenblatt 1980.

49 See Nikolaus von Kues 1944, XXIV, fol.178: "Etenim spiritus ille, qui de sua virtute ad omnia pergit, omnia scrutatur et creat omnium notiones atque similitudines; creat, inquam, quoniam rerum similitudines notionales ex alio aliquo non facit, sicut nec spiritus, qui Deus rerum quidditates facit ex alio, sed ex se aut 'non alio'."

50 Pico della Mirandola 2012, p. 117. For a detailed interpretation of Pico's oration see Schelkshorn 2016, pp. 163–204.

Although man is a “free shaper” of himself (“tui ipsius [...] plastes et factor”⁵¹), the question what kind of nature man has to give himself already finds its answer in a neo-Platonic cosmology. Embedded in a stable hierarchical order, self-fashioning human beings are oriented towards a spiritual ascension: from a brute life capable only of attaining corporal pleasures to a human mode of living in accordance with moral standards, and finally to an angelic life of pure reason in which man is liberated from passions. In spite of its extreme rhetoric of self-fashioning, which seems to anticipate Fichte or Sartre, Pico’s oration remains within the horizon of a spiritual ascent to the vision of God, combining motifs drawn from Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions.

Nonetheless, Pico breaks with the traditional anthropology from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas where the flexibility of human freedom was problematised in different ways. According to Aristotle, the malleability of human nature must be stabilised by ethical virtues. As Aristotle argues, people without virtuous attitudes are like chameleons.⁵² Thomas Aquinas, however, contrasts the flexibility of human freedom with the eternal nature of the angels whose vision of God is not disturbed by passions. According to Pico, in contrast, the dignity of human beings is founded precisely in their capacity to undertake chameleon-like self-transformations that elevates them even above the angels: “Who will not wonder at this chameleon of ours?”⁵³

A century later, the metaphysical framework of Pico’s philosophy of the creative has collapsed. The astronomical revolution relocates the self-fashioning man in an infinite universe, thus losing the orientation of ancient hierarchical cosmologies. The confrontation with moral and cultural standards of hitherto unknown peoples produces an erosion of the doctrine of natural law. In this context Michel de Montaigne reformulates the Renaissance embrace of the creativity of human freedom from a sceptical point of view. On the basis of relentless self-examination as documented in his *Essais*, Montaigne replaces both ancient and Christian ideals for living with an endless process of experimental self-explorations.⁵⁴ Faced with the religious wars in early modernity, Montaigne rejects Pico’s plea to elevate the self into an angelic nature:

They want to get out of themselves and escape from man. That is madness: instead of changing into angels, they change into beasts; instead of

51 Pico della Mirandola 2012, p. 117.

52 Aristoteles, *Nicomachean Ethics* I 11,1100b6f. “For clearly if we were to track a person’s fortunes, we shall find ourselves often calling the same person happy, and then miserable, thus revealing the happy man as a kind of ‘chameleon’, and ‘infirmly based.’”

53 Pico della Mirandola 2012, p. 125.

54 Montaigne 1958; see Schelkshorn 2016, pp. 345–407.

raising themselves, they lower themselves. These transcendental humors frighten me, like softly and inaccessible places.⁵⁵

Renouncing superhuman ideals, Montaigne proposes the acceptance of the finiteness of human existence as the principle of a new wisdom: "It is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own, and go outside of ourselves because we do not know what it is like inside."⁵⁶

Nonetheless, Montaigne does not completely reject Pico's idea of creative self-fashioning. On the contrary, as Montaigne gradually becomes aware in his Essays, by simply exploring the own self, human beings unavoidably give themselves a certain form. In addition, Montaigne initiates a remarkable revaluation of values: the volatile and malleable nature of the human mind, previously the means by which man was made painfully aware of his limitedness and frailness, are suddenly turned into the positive content of a new model of life, one to be realised in ever-new self-creations. Montaigne thus develops a new model of the good life, linking the Renaissance ideas of creative freedom and insatiable curiosity into the practice of an experimental search for new modes of life. And what is more, the traditional maxim – to choose an ideal model of life that is in keeping *with reason* – would now restrict the scope necessary for free self-creation, i.e. trying out other models and ways of living: "If it were up to me to train myself in my own fashion, there is no way so good [!] that I should want to be fixed in it and unable to break loose."⁵⁷

Montaigne even increases the apotheosis of the creative power of human liberty, decoupling the practice of self-fashioning from the validity claims of rationality. The rational demand to seek true or real life suddenly appears as a limitation of experimental self-exploration.

To sum up: Michel de Montaigne explicates an original conception of modern subjectivity as a practice of experimental self-fashioning. Exploring the variability and mutability of human nature, Montaigne opens a new field of modern curiosity. Moreover, looking for new or other, but not necessarily better, forms of a good life, Montaigne paves the way for later transformations of the Socratic care of the self into an aesthetic practice of self-creations. Against

55 Montaigne 1958, III,13; p. 856; see also III,9; p. 623: "Others study how to elevate their minds and hoist them up tight; I, how to humble mine and lay it to rest. It is defective only when it reaches out." The skepticism towards superhuman ideals of existence is also directed at the Christian way of life and its potential violence, which erupts in confessional civil wars.

56 Montaigne 1958, III,13; p. 857.

57 Montaigne 1958, III,3; p. 621.

this background, the historical significance of the Essays cannot be limited to a skeptical background for Descartes' *ego cogito*, as historians of philosophy have usually situated the thought of Montaigne.⁵⁸ On the contrary, just like Descartes' *cogito*, Montaigne's Essays established a tradition of modern subjectivity which provoked a great variety of modifications that has continued down to contemporary philosophy. Through the influence of Nietzsche, Montaigne's idea of experimental self-fashioning became a dominant feature of European modernity. In effect, this means that even the concept of a rational subject generally held as the most important pillar of modernity contains both rational gains and cultural or even trans-rational elements amalgamated into the dynamics of de-limitations in the early modernity.

3 De-limitations in the Constitution of Modern Science and Economics: Francis Bacon and John Locke

The de-limitations emerging in the Renaissance had a deep impact on the philosophical reflections of modern subsystems in the 17th century. In the following, I would like to illustrate this thesis with two examples: Francis Bacon's conception of modern science and the philosophy of economics of John Locke.

Francis Bacon's draft of a new science has elicited extremely varied reactions in the discourses on modernity.⁵⁹ While Enlightenment thinkers worshipped Bacon as the ingenious founder of a rational, methodically disciplined science, Horkheimer and Adorno criticised the *Instauratio magna* as the starting point of the positivist conception of science identifying science with power: "Although not a mathematician, Bacon well understood the scientific temper which was to come after him [...] Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters."⁶⁰ Bacon's contribution to modern science, however, is neither adequately appreciated by euphoric praise in the name of the Enlightenment nor by condemnation as the archetype of a modern totalitarianism. In contrast to dualistic views, I wish to propose a new approach to Baconian science against the background of the de-limitations in the Renaissance usually neglected by

58 See Toulmin 1990, pp. 37–44; Taylor 1987, pp. 143–158; pp. 177–184; Reyes 2007, pp. 36 et seq.: "No obstante, y éste es uno de los ejes del presente libro, hay al menos tres aspectos importantes, que dificultan esta lectura de los *Ensayos*, favoreciendo más una interpretación de Montaigne como *alternativa* al subjetivismo cartesiano que como precursor de éste."

59 For the following sketch about Bacon see Schelkshorn 2016, pp. 411–468.

60 Horkheimer/Adorno 2002, p. 2.

defenders and critics of Bacon's thought. Bacon himself, however, was quite enthusiastic about the Renaissance idea of an infinite universe, accusing classical metaphysics of ignoring the richness of things in two ways: firstly, because of its essentialist orientation, ancient philosophy hastily jumped to form a few observations on universal concepts, eliminating the inner richness of things; secondly, favouring celestial regions, classical metaphysics devaluated explorations of the terrestrial world. Destroying the ontological distinction between higher and lower regions of the universe in Aristotelian cosmology, Bacon programmatically announced a new maxim for scientific research: "For whatever deserves to exist deserves to be known, for knowledge is the image of existence."⁶¹

As the "subtlety of nature is greater many times over than the subtlety of the senses and understanding",⁶² the Baconian scientist is confronted with the limits of man's cognitive faculties. In contrast to Montaigne's recommendation to accept the frailty of the human condition, Bacon appeals to natural philosophy as a way of overcoming the limitations of cognitive faculties. The weakness of the human senses⁶³ should be compensated through technical instruments like the telescope or the microscope just as the fallibility of reason should be corrected by the experimental method. Although experiments violently press nature into a new course, the purpose of the new science is not merely the subjugation of nature. On the contrary, the aim of scientific experiments is to amplify the richness of nature, thereby setting free its latent potentialities. Hence, Bacon's philosophy of science envisages a synergy between human creativity and the latent potentialities of nature. "Towards effecting of works all that man can do is to put together or put asunder natural bodies. The rest is done by nature working within."⁶⁴ Far from being reduced to inert

61 Bacon: *Novum Organum* I, Aph. 120, (Works IV, p. 197). The affirmation of the lower beings of the universe is founded in the biblical doctrine of the creation. Defending the variety of nature against the mental restrictions of classical metaphysics, Bacon mainly appeals to pre-Socratic philosophies. See Bacon: *Tempus Partus Masculus*, in: Farrington 1951, p. 71: "Democritus attributed to nature immense variety and infinite succession, thus setting himself apart from almost all other philosophers, who were prisoners of their times and slaves of fashion."

62 Bacon: *Novum Organum* I, Aph. 10 (Works IV, p. 48).

63 See Bacon: *Instauratio magna, Distributio operis* (Works IV, p. 26): "The sense fails in two ways. Sometimes it gives no information, sometimes it gives false information. For the first, there are many things which escape the sense, even when best disposed and no way obstructed; by reason either of the subtly of the whole body, of the minuteness of the parts, of distance of place, or slowness of else swiftness of motion, of familiarity of the object, of other causes."

64 Bacon, *Novum Organum* I, Aph. 4 (Works IV, p. 47).

matter for human manipulation, nature undertakes its own experiments, as is observable in irregular natural phenomena.⁶⁵

For this reason, the ambivalence of Bacon's science lies less in an uncontrolled will to power, as Horkheimer and Adorno suppose, but rather in the extreme will to increase the infinite richness of nature. Bacon, in a way, radicalises the notion of immanent infinity of the world as developed by Nicholas of Cusa. Although Bacon does not simply identify science with power, the *Instauratio magna*, nevertheless, contains a dangerous ambiguity. Bacon assigns two goals (*fines*) to natural philosophy, firstly, "the knowledge of Causes and the secret motions of things", and, secondly, the "enlarging of Human Empire, to the effecting of all [sic!] things possible."⁶⁶ The first goal only repeats the traditional definition of science, while the second opens a totally new horizon, encouraging an unbridled release of all creative potentialities of man and nature. The aim – "effecting of all [!] things possible" – cannot be justified by the idea of scientific truth or the search for the causes of nature. Therefore, Bacon burdens the project of a new science with an extreme and perhaps even irrational utopia, as Brian Vickers has criticised.⁶⁷

To sum up: Bacon's foundation of experimental science marks a great step on the way to an exploration of nature in the name of reason. The ambiguity of Baconian science is not founded in a dubious will of reason to violently repress nature. On the contrary, Bacon's philosophy of science is imbued with an overwhelming fascination of the unlimited diversity and richness of nature. It is precisely this fascination that seduced Bacon to the extreme or even irrational vision of "effecting of all things possible", which moves the "new science" into a highly ambiguous area, evident for instance in the destructive power of nuclear technology or current developments in human genetics. Obviously, there is no intrinsic necessity to link modern science with such a utopia, one meanwhile threatening the very future of humanity. The reasons for the ecological disaster, therefore, do not lie in the experimental method of Baconian science as Horkheimer and Adorno sought to point out, but in the systemic links between science and unleashed capitalist economy, the theoretical foundations of which are already formulated in the work of John Locke.⁶⁸

65 See Bacon, *Novum Organum* II, Aph. 60 (Works IV, p. 196): "But when the spirit is neither wholly detained nor wholly discharged, but only makes trials and experiments within its prison-house, and meets with tangible parts that are obedient and ready to follow ..."

66 Bacon, *New Atlantis* (Works III, p. 156).

67 Vickers 1968, p. 5: "Indeed the whole end of his philosophy is a non-rational vision of man's unlimited capacity to dominate the universe".

68 See Schelkshorn 2016, pp. 517–593.

John Locke was not only a great political thinker but also an economic theorist. The economic rise of the northern Italian city-states and the dynamic of the tri-continental trade after the discovery of America had already pushed Renaissance philosophy towards a reevaluation of market economics. For instance, Francisco de Vitoria integrated the right to trade in his theory of international law. Locke, however, develops a philosophical justification of the market economy in a subtle dispute with the Aristotelean *oikonomía*. Locke presciently describes the systemic momentum of market economy. State intervention in market processes can be counterproductive, as Locke analyses through the example of interest rate policy.⁶⁹

At the same time, Locke changes Bacon's concept of nature at a crucial point: in his famous labor theory of property, nature is reduced to mere material for human manipulation. This labor theory of property is at the center of Locke's economics. Although affirming Baconian science, Locke devaluates Bacon's idea of an inner productivity of nature. According to Locke it is primarily human labor which produces useful goods: "And that which made up the great part of what he applied to the Support or Comfort of his being, when *Invention and Arts* had improved the conveniences of Life, was perfectly his own and did not belong on common to others."⁷⁰ Undeveloped land is only worthless wasteland as Locke states, justifying the colonial interest of the British settlers against the nomadic tribes in North America. The settlers gain land rights by cultivating and farming land.⁷¹ Elevating labor to the almost exclusive factor of production Locke initiates the epochal effacing of nature in modern economics: "Nature and the Earth furnished only the almost worthless Materials."⁷² It is Locke's economics – and not Bacon, as Horkheimer and Adorno assumed – which reduces nature to a mere material of human power.⁷³

In contrast to Aristotle's verdict against limitless accumulation of money as an irrational idea, Locke defends the unleashed dynamic of a money economy basing himself on Bacon's idea of a limitless richness of nature. Thus, Locke

69 See Vaughn 1980.

70 Locke 1988, II, §44; pp. 298 et seq. See also II, §42; p. 297: "*labour makes the far greatest part of the value of things, we enjoy in the World.*"

71 Locke 1988, II, §42; p. 297: "Land that is left wholly to Nature, that hath no improvement of Pasturage, Tillage, or Planting, is called, as indeed it is, *wast*; and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing." About this colonial topic see Arneil 1996; Talbot 2010.

72 Locke 1988, II, §43; p. 298.

73 At this point I want to refer to Bolívar Echeverría's differentiation between modernity as technological revolution overcoming absolute scarcity and its capitalist continuation, which produces artificial scarcity, devaluating the original promises of modernity, namely abundance and emancipation. See Echeverría 2006, pp. 204–208.

paves the way for the rather irrational idea of unlimited economic growth, which has led humanity to the brink of global disaster. Like Bacon's theological foundations of modern science, Locke relies on religious horizons when justifying an unlimited monetary economy. The globally expanding market economy leads not only to greater material wealth, but also to populous states. This is seen as fulfilling the Creator's commandment "*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the Earth*".⁷⁴

Locke's justification of the system of market economy amalgamates rational with highly problematic moments in a quite complex synthesis. Firstly, Locke's evaluation of labor as the central category for any understanding of economy represents a certain rational advance in economic theory. In contrast, the Aristotelean economy assigned production to slaves without reflecting its constitutive significance for the concept of *oikonomia*. Secondly, the labor theory of property rights is part of a colonial ideology. Moreover, Locke is already aware that the market economy will displace all other types of society, from nomadic tribes to great reigns like the Ottoman Empire. Thirdly, basing himself on Bacon's idea of an unlimited richness of nature, Locke lays the foundation for the modern myth of unlimited economic growth. However, while money can be multiplied indefinitely as a symbolic reality, nature, in spite of its inescapable wealth for us, remains limited in principle. Now, if nature is subjected to the logic of limitless money multiplication, as Christoph Binswanger sharply points out, "an alchemical transmutation process of nature (N) into money (G) takes place, which apparently enables man to claim nature and yet to avoid the finitude of nature and to expand the economy to infinity."⁷⁵ The myth of boundless growth would probably not have been possible without the early modern idea of an infinite wealth of nature.

4 Conclusion: the Ambivalence of European Modernity and Intercultural Relations

The dispute over the Enlightenment has dominated the discourse on modernity since the late eighteenth century. Defenders of the Enlightenment tend to promote the vision of a Europeanisation of all other civilizations, identifying the European achievements of a rational exploration of the world with the evolution of human rationality as such. Culturalist views on modernity,

74 Locke 1988, I, §33; pp. 164 et seq. About the theological horizons of Locke's philosophy of economics see Pridatt 1998.

75 Binswanger 1991, pp. 186 et seq.

however, lead to an aporetic “clash of civilisations” (Huntington). Finally, post-structuralist and de-colonial theories of modernity reduce modernity to a syndrome of power.

In order to break up the rigid front lines between defenders and critics of “the” Enlightenment, I have proposed to approach modernity as a process of multiple de-limitations, one that amalgamates rational achievements, cultural or even irrational moments and not least syndromes of power-relations. Against this background, I would like to highlight the ambivalences of modernity and its consequences for cross-cultural relations.

Firstly, a self-critical defense of Enlightenment seems indispensable to both culturalist and power-theoretical theories of modernity. However, as Enlightenment self-interpretations of modernity are often based on the implicit vision of a Europeanisation of all humanity, it should be remembered at the same time that Enlightenment is neither a monopoly of European societies nor of modern times. The process of questioning religious mythical world-views, for instance, already starts in the Axial Age in many cultures.⁷⁶

Against this background, the theory of modernity as a process of pluriform de-limitation, as I sketched above, casts new light on the ambivalences of modernity opening new perspectives for the relations between different cultures within global society. In particular, the distinction between rational achievements and cultural elements in the inner circles of modernity allows us to move beyond the entrenched frontlines of the debates on universalistic claims of modernity. To conclude, I would like to suggest a few points for further consideration.

Against culturalist and power theories of modernity, we have to recognise certain spectacular rational achievements of modernity from the astronomical revolution through to the concept of a constitutional state based on human rights. Since critical reflection on mythical or religious tradition is not a monopoly of the European mind, but a feature of all so-called axial cultures, it is not surprising that the scientific traditions of India and the Islamic world also facilitated the genesis of modern science. In addition, the insight into cross-cultural paths of reason in history contains an important consequence for today. Enlightenment movements within and outside European culture are

76 The theory of “Axial Age” is the central topic of Karl Jaspers’ philosophy of history: see Jaspers 1953. Jaspers argued that during the Axial Age (800–200 B.C.) philosophers and founders of new religions arose simultaneously and independently in China, India, Persia, Judea, and Greece criticising the mythological traditions and the institution of sacral monarchy. The Axial Age has become a controversial theme both in the history of religion and contemporary philosophies (e.g. Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas), see Schelkshorn 2017.

obliged by their own imperative – inherent to the search for truth – to dispute and examine all rational views on nature or society, regardless of the culture in which they arose. This means that just as European philosophy and science has to recognise, examine and verify increases of rationality in China, India, the Arab region, and so on, for their part non-European cultures also have to consider the rational achievements of European modernity, and relate them to their own rational traditions.

Secondly, modernity is not a holistic process of Enlightenment. Since its rational gains are intimately tied to cultural and even irrational elements, the expansion of European modernity encourages not only a worldwide culture of Enlightenment but produces permanent cultural clashes as well. The excessive ideas of modern culture, like the experimental self-fashioning, the unleashing of technical power or the idea of infinite economic growth were perceived as a break with rational (!) standards that had been established and upheld for a thousand years within European culture. This means that the planetary spread of European modernity promotes a diffusion of rational breakthroughs on the one hand, and the enforcement of certain cultural projects, often supported by huge military forces, on the other. Therefore not all anti-modernist movements – both inside and outside of Europe – are motivated solely by regressive resentments against the rationalisation process of modernity as defenders of “the” Enlightenment tend to suggest. Rather, certain anti-modernist groups articulate a legitimate protest against the more cultural and even irrational impacts of European society and its politics of global hegemony.

Some cultural ideas of modernity, for instance the idea of experimental self-fashioning, however, are still fascinating for people both in and outside Europe. For this reason, the spread of European modernity cannot be described only as an impact of modern technologies linked with materialistic or utilitarian spirit as some Christian, neo-Hindu or Islamic philosophies have critically exposed. Just as European culture has absorbed a myriad of impulses from oriental and African cultures since the 16th century, especially in art, ethics and religion, non-European cultures are creatively adopting and transforming cultural elements of European modernity. This can be observed in daily life as well as in the experiments of “modern” artists in many societies outside Europe.

Thirdly, some visions of European modernity, such as Bacon’s option for an unlimited release of all potentialities of nature or the idea of endless economic growth, contain not only cultural but also irrational dimensions, which have freed up and released a gigantic potential for self-destruction on a scale unimaginable in pre-modern ages. Without negating the achievements of Enlightenment, we cannot ignore the fact that European modernity has led

mankind into an epochal impasse. If the view on modernity as a multiple process of de-limitation reveals the main features of its complexity, we can understand why options for self-restraint or discourses on the limits of growth hardly find acceptance in Western cultures. The evolution of modernity is based on the pathos of transcending borders, discovering new areas, permanently expanding the horizon of human action. For this reason, Western politics still favours technological progress and economic growth in order to deal with the ecological disaster. The technocratic option presupposes a certain wager, not the wager of Pascal, which referred to the existence of God and life after the death of individuals, but one on the future of humanity. In effect, this means we are to continue with the destruction of nature under the fictive presupposition that future technologies will be able to repair at least the gravest damages.

Humanity, therefore, faces the task of developing a new understanding of measure and limit. Since ancient ethics is part of a worldview that can no longer be restored, pre-modern cultures of self-restraint can only provide us with inspiration, not with concrete solutions for the gigantic challenges of late modernity. Accepting the complexity of modern societies, each subsystem must be carefully analysed regarding the opportunities and risks of its de-limitations and requirements of self-limitation.

For example, an ecological reorientation of the economy requires on the one hand a reduction of overconsumption in industrialised countries, but not the abandonment of modern science as such. We need modern science to identify and reduce the most severe and extensive environmental damages, and to initiate and implement global change to the energy industry. The technology of solar energy uses the hidden forces of nature in accordance with the demands of Bacon's vision of a new science. We must not reject Baconian science as such, but its extreme imperative to the "effecting of all things possible" which inspired Locke to formulate the irrational idea of unlimited economic growth. Against this background, the discourse of sustainability seems to be one of the main counter-discourses to the dominant discourse on modernity. The idea of sustainability departs from the idea of limits and restraints breaking with one of the deepest affective dimensions of modernity since its beginning in the 15th century.

These are only a few remarks in order to highlight the dialectic of de-limitations in present world society. Since the eighteenth century, however, the global discourse on modernity has been a discourse on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of de-limitations and limitations in modern society using different concepts of rationality. Its countless constellations and frontlines cannot be treated exhaustively in this context, where I mainly tried to reconstruct the genesis of the dialectic of de-limitations in early modernity.

At the end of this rough sketch, I would like to refer to Albert Camus, who in the middle of the 20th century called for a new sensitivity for boundaries, however without questioning the modern culture of creative freedom. Although for Camus returning to the Greeks is inconceivable, modernity can find inspiration for a new ethics of self-limitation in ancient sources.

This limit was symbolized by Nemesis, the goddess of moderation and the implacable enemy of the immoderate. A process of thought which wanted to take into account the contemporary contradictions of rebellion should seek its inspiration from this goddess. Nemesis, the goddess of measure, ruinous to the limitless, was the symbol of that limit. A thinking that wants to incorporate the present contradictions of revolt, would have to get his inspiration from this goddess.⁷⁷

Biography

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⁷⁷ Camus 2013, p. 238.

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