

## **Publications**

### **The Social Sciences in the US and in Europe: Plural Interpretations of Modernity**

**by Peter Wagner**

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The recent visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel marked the culmination of a process of rapprochement of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish religious community. This process started quite some years ago, its first public occasion being the visit of the Pope to the synagogue in Rome in 1986. John Paul II, possibly inaugurating the general movement of reconciliation and pardoning that has marked the past decade, addressed his audience as 'Dear Jewish and Christian friends and brothers' and when turning explicitly to the Jewish listeners uttered the since then often quoted phrase 'You are our favorite brothers and, in a certain sense we may say, our elder brothers'. On this occasion, as on many others, the speech was interrupted by sustained applause, as observers report.

Some years later, there was a little uproar in Italian political-intellectual circles when historian Carlo Ginzburg (1998: 210-215) dared to pour some water into the wine. He reminded of the fact that the term 'the elder brother' had a long history in Christian thought, even a constitutive semantic role in that history. It was used by Paul – the first Paul - in the letter to the Romans, and Paul in turn referred to the Lord telling Rebecca, who was pregnant with twins, that 'the elder one will be subjected by the younger' (Genesis). And this was as it turned out to be: Jacob, the younger son, bought the rights of the first-born, Esau, for a lentil dish, after having cheated him about the legitimacy of that transaction.

I do not mean to comment on the interpretations of John Paul's speech; nor do I intend to intervene in any way into the discussions about the relations between Christianity and Judaism in general. I am not the person and this is not the place to do that. However, I want to suggest that we can think fruitfully about the relations between Americans and Europeans, and in particular about their intellectual – or spiritual-intellectual (*geistige*) - relations in analogy to this time-honored story of the two brothers.

It would be pretentious – or ludicrous – to aim at an overall comparison of the American and European social sciences in our time in this short address. This cannot be the objective. I rather want to point to a structural feature in our ways – social-science ways – of analyzing the social world; a structural feature that exists on both sides of the Atlantic, but that finds observably different expressions on each side. And the story of the two brothers provides a way of describing that structure.

The story suggests a relation in which the elder brother – and with many inverted commas I say here: 'the European' – can say that he is the rightful inheritor of great intellectual traditions, but that over time the younger brother, 'the American', has appropriated this heritage, indeed developed, but also

changed it, and has partly turned it against the elder – with success, since he had grown much more powerful.

The younger brother, in turn, would say, yes, there is a debt I have towards you, because you gave me the main ideas and practices – but I improved on them and put them right where you still tended to get them wrong. It needed me lifting these ideas out of their context of origin to develop them into the powerful intellectual tools that they now are.

Some of you will be aware of the fact that such discourse, especially from the elder brother's end, was quite common in broader intellectual circles during the inter-war period – that is, the first moment when Europeans strongly experienced the presence of the US in terms of superiority. That situation gave rise to a critical, self-reflexive discourse on the modernity of Europe.

But let me give you some examples – altogether four – of how I detect such a structure in intellectual relations in current social science. I will do that briefly, obviously, and by emphasizing the features that permit the supposition – even though not always quite justifiably – of a move as described in the story of the two brothers.

1. *Individualist liberalism as a political philosophy.* This thinking gradually emerged in the European seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It became inescapable with the American and French Revolutions, the onset of political modernity, as one might say, although it did not yet become widely accepted on those grounds. Rather, it started to flourish in political theory at US – and partly UK – universities after the Second World War, with, again somewhat later, John Rawls's Theory of Justice becoming the landmark publication. Since then, individualist liberalism has become the pivotal approach to political theory. The current situation can be described by an anecdote: an English philosopher, specializing in so-called Continental Philosophy, went to Frankfurt on a Humboldt Foundation scholarship some years ago hoping to live and work for a while in the Frankfurt School milieu. All he found, as he said, was discussions about Rawls and Michael Walzer and the dispute between liberals and communitarians.

2. *Rational choice theory as a theory of action.* Rational choice theorists normally do not endow their approach with a long history. In their view, it started only in the middle of the twentieth century. However, a lineage can easily be traced that goes back to Hobbes and then leads to Condorcet and some other Enlightenment thinkers. Through political economy, the approach receives a clear place in moral philosophy, as well as an objective, the increase in the wealth of nations. Thus, it addresses issues of a theory of social order and of distributive justice at the same time. Modified and formalized in the neoclassical mode of economics, which emerges from the marginalist revolution in the late nineteenth century, it acquires the potential to become a general theory of action – a potential that is realized after the Second World War. This thinking is now widespread across the globe and across the disciplines of the social sciences, but nowhere as strongly as in the US and, in particular, in this city.

3. *Quantification as a methodological device.* Explicit moves towards quantification in the social sciences are normally dated to the seventeenth century and to political arithmetic in England and France, which worked with state-provided data. Statistics became a more refined and reflected tool in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth century. But the key person to mention in this context is a young Austrian socialist and mathematician, who tried to put his skills to good use in the socialist-led city administration of 'Red Vienna' after the First World War. Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, that is his name, went into exile to the US and founded the Bureau for Applied Social Research at Columbia University. After the second war, he was probably the leading methodologist in American social science.

4. *Disciplinary organization and professionalization.* There are many ways of dividing up the modes to study the social world. The major social-science perspectives such as the economic, sociological, cultural or statistical ones were all well developed at the end of the nineteenth century. But in Europe, they mostly did not give rise at that time to separated disciplines and professions, with well-demarcated fields and boundaries. Current thinking about the disciplines of the social sciences is indeed often based on a view which takes their American history as the model. In the US, a non-disciplinary, quite amateurish and politically oriented American Social Science Association (ASSA), which was founded in 1865, came under increasing pressures to develop a proper scientific and professional statute towards the end of the nineteenth century. Since it proved unable to reform itself, disciplinary associations were formed one after the other by breaking away from ASSA, following the example set by the American Historical Association (AHA) in 1884. Thus, the American Economic Association (AEA), founded in 1885, the American Political Science Association, founded in 1903, and the American Society for Sociology (ASS, now ASA), splitting off from AEA, were formed, providing by the beginning of this century the ideal picture of social science disciplines that is still familiar today. Under the guidance of UNESCO, this model was globalized after the Second World War, not least by founding the international associations such as ISA and IPSA.

Broadly, I take it to be observable that these four approaches and orientations are more widespread in the American than in the European social sciences. But let me first say what I cannot do here: To underpin such an observation, a comprehensive study would be needed which is not available. Even if it were, its results would probably be too complex to be presented in the very limited space here. Let me just focus on one single question, on the sense, namely, in which these approaches can make a claim to intellectual superiority with regard to the traditions from which they have emerged – that is, superiority of the younger brother over the elder one. There is an asymmetry in this intellectual constellation, and it is this asymmetry that I am interested in.

It is not difficult to find explicit claims to superiority in the approaches I described. I will just give one example from political philosophy. Speaking about some version of liberalism, namely in terms of 'the growth of freedom' and 'the rise of liberal institutions and customs', an American philosopher recently claimed that 'Western social and political thought may have had the last conceptual revolution it needs'. One should think that, at the end of the twentieth century, such a phrase contains far too much vulgar philosophy of history to be seriously sustained. But the author was not Francis Fukuyama, it was Richard Rorty who wrote this phrase in the late 1980s (Rorty 1989: 63).

I hasten to underline that, certainly, the elder brother is alive and active. There may be a claim to superiority by the younger one, but there is no monopoly. There are critiques of liberalism, in the form of communitarianism, multiculturalism, republicanism and the like. There are critiques of individualist

rationality, in the name of the situatedness of action, of socio-cultural embeddedness, of creativity and the like. There are other methodologies to social science than merely quantitative ones. And the calls persist and, time and again, revive that the boundaries need to be kept open, not only between the disciplines of the social sciences, but also towards philosophy, literature, even aesthetics and theology.

If this is the case, it may come as a surprise that I do not at all want to contest the claim to superiority by the approaches I described. Rather I want to accept it, but in a specific way.

There is something unsurpassable in them that needs to be understood. And in my interpretation, that which makes them unsurpassable is the particular vision of modernity that is embedded in them. By modernity, to put it briefly, I refer to a self-understanding of human social life that is based on the ideas of autonomy, on the one hand, that is the capacity of human beings to give themselves their own laws, and of mastery and control, on the other, that is the idea that the world can, in principle, be known and controlled (the natural world, the social world, and one's own self). In the European tradition, the Enlightenment combination of freedom and reason is a prominent form of a modern self-understanding, but it is not the only one.

The four approaches to the social sciences as I described them above radicalize the modern orientation. As organizational and methodological models, the ambition to order and master the world seems quite evident. In the two theoretical approaches – the political philosophy and the theory of action – the relation between autonomy and mastery is more complex.

Both individualist liberalism and individualist rationalism are theories of freedom. Their specificity is to start out from the singular human being, defined as an individual, devoid of any specificity, rather than from social relations or from any form of collectivity of humans. From this starting-point, they devise a relation of such individual to the world, in terms of instrumental or procedural rationality. They can hardly do otherwise, since all substantive features of social life were eliminated in the first step.

This is a very specific interpretation of autonomy and mastery – autonomy as individual, and mastery as instrumental. It is a somewhat dogmatic rendering of what modernity is about. That is why I prefer to call those approaches 'modernist' rather than just 'modern'. Through this dogmatism, these approaches generate resistance and critique, as I briefly said before. They respond to such critique by pointing to their achievements of, first, removing all contaminations of history and sociality from analysis, and second, of being able to create a distance from context and situation that is, in their view, required for social and political theorizing. In other words, they create a purity that underpins their claim to universality (or, at least, universalizability). By virtue of this move, they push everything else – the approaches of their critics – into the realm of the specific, the particular, or even – when a direction of history is implied – of a remnant of tradition. It is this step that produces the asymmetry; but it also gives these approaches a clarity and coherence that makes it inescapable to take them into account when analyzing the social world.

How can we deal with this intellectual situation? To conclude, let me come back to the two brothers. In a remarkable book, *Europe, la voie romaine*, Rémy Brague, a philosopher and historian of philosophy, develops the idea of Europe's 'secondarity', using a related image of twinning. If the search for identity

is a search for sources, for origins, then, he argues, it is characteristic for Europe to find its sources outside of itself, to find itself secondary to something which it is not. If in cultural-religious terms Europe is predominantly Christian, then we need to add that Christianity is historically secondary to Judaism. If in philosophical-political-institutional terms Europe draws on the heritage of the Roman Republic, then we need to note that this Republic derived its inspiration from the Greek polis, is secondary to the latter.

Brague's conclusion is that it is this secondarity, the tension between the one and the other source (in both respects), that is behind the specificity of Europe. This secondarity gave Europe its historical dynamism, the searching and self-questioning nature of its philosophical and political life. A full appreciation of such reading of Europe's intellectual history would require a detailed discussion for which there is no space here. For the present purpose, let me just suggest that European modernity may have created a new such tension, namely the one between 'modernism' and its critics in political philosophy and in social theory; and that this tension can to some extent – with all due caution, which also needs to be applied to Brague – be mapped onto the actually existing social world: as 'America' and as 'Europe' (in the form of a geo-philosophy of 'the West', to employ Massimo Cacciari's term).

In this sense, the approaches I discussed briefly are expressions of the search for an identity of modernity, for the specifically modern solutions to socio-political problématiques. This quest for identity explains their striving for purity.

In my view, such striving is both necessary and futile. It is necessary because its 'method' (using the term broadly) of distancing from the context provided intellectual means to deal with problematic historical situations. Thus, liberalism, in its origins, was developed to deal with religious wars and revolutions and with the diversity of human strivings that thus became politically visible. Individualist rationalism provided ways of dealing with the emergence of an industrial-capitalist mode of production and with 'the social question'. Quantification was developed as a means for dealing with the novel issues emerging with mass-democratic societies and welfare states. Even though we can now – with hindsight – also analyze the shortcomings of all those solutions, their intellectual supports have enriched our ways of understanding the social world.

But it is a futile error to think of these approaches – in political philosophy, social theory and methodology – as self-sufficient modes of analyzing the social world, regardless of context or situation. This would mean to try to overcome their secondarity by means of a new purity. And such an attempt would be grossly misleading. It would try to eliminate precisely the tension that generates creativity and plurality in the interpretive struggles over what modernity is about. By implication, such move would distance the others who do not follow it, treat them as 'less advanced'. It would mean the attempt to dominate the elder brother (who, in turn, would resort to the counter-argument that these elaborations, while having sound roots, have gone too far, have misdeveloped – that was the structure of the European argument towards America during the inter-war period).

In contrast, precisely the space of reasoning that opens up between the purity of social-science modernism and its critics is of interest. This space provides the interpretive possibility to think of varieties of modernity, as varieties of conceptualizing autonomy and mastery and their relation to one

another. Then, the relation between Europe and America – and their respective social sciences – would not be the one of a younger, more energetic modernity that has outperformed the older one, but the relation of one interpretation of modernity to other ones – and yet other ones outside of the so-called West.

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