



Edited by Hatem N. Akil and Simone Maddanu

# Global Modernity from Coloniality to Pandemic

A Cross-disciplinary Perspective

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*A Cross-disciplinary Perspective*

*Edited by*

*Hatem N. Akil and Simone Maddanu*

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# Preface

This book is the product of years of a global conversation across many disciplines and many time zones between the editors and the contributors about the meaning of modernity today and the crises we all face in the form of globalization, climate crisis, technological advancement, populism, and now a global pandemic. We wanted to understand how scholars who work in different parts of the world and are engaged in disparate areas of research such as sociology, mathematics, philosophy, medicine, political science, artificial intelligence, visual theory, literary theory, etc., would respond to a call to share their disciplinary perspectives on the understanding and challenges of modernity today, and – most importantly – the opportunities and the alternatives they would propose. The following pages contain the results of these conversations.

One of the unintended consequences of conducting a conversation across multiple disciplines, multiple languages, and multiple geographies is that one begins to realize the immensity of the methodological and linguistic disjunctions which still significantly demarcate our disciplines. As editors, we elected to respect the disciplinary and linguistic diversity of our contributors at the expense of consistency and conformity.

We wish also and most of all to offer our deepest thanks and gratitude to our contributors for their hard work and inspired contributions. In addition, we want to recognize the contributions of all those who supported our project, directly or indirectly, particularly colleagues and friends whom we met all around the world since the beginning of this book journey in the summer of 2018 in Beijing and then in Orlando, Florida. We owe to them the essential spirit, inspiration, and curiosity that were necessary to achieve this work. In alphabetic order, we thank Debbie Barr, Patrick Blythe, Elizabeth Deans, David DiQuattro, Roger Downey, Michael Flaherty, Fayeza Hasanat, Baboucar Jobe, Louise Kaine, Michael Mendoza, Marwan Shaban, Debra Socci, Lisa Valentino, Adrienne Vivian, and Han Wen.

The editors

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# 1. Connecting Modernities

A Global Update

*Simone Maddanu and Hatem N. Akil*

## Abstract

Editors' introductory chapter delineates common threads among the volume's cross-disciplinary contributions and connects these to the history of research on modernity as well as the most compelling issues confronting us today. The introduction discusses how the pandemic carries on the possibility (threat?) of a *tabula rasa* condition, a civilizational detour based on a foundation of global awareness of nature and society. The authors support the need for global problem-solving strategies, new global ethics, and a global resource management paradigm solidly cognizant of the commons and redistribution. The introduction explores the main hiatuses in today's modernity and provides an update to the necessary assertion of a global modernity in the midst of political, ecological, and health crises.

**Keywords:** connected modernities; pandemic COVID-19; global modernity; commons; social movements

The use terms and concepts like modernity, modernism, and modernization is a leitmotif and common denominator of various disciplines. However, modernity, modernism, and modernization are also controversial concepts that range from the theoretical to the empirical. Resurging in the last decades in the light of globalization, the climate crisis, technological advancement, and populism, the questioning of modernity begins to couple with questions of our present time and plans for the future.

When and how did we start being modern? One may note that the attribution of specific characteristics of modernity traces back to a fundamental switch from one epoch to another: the dissociation with tradition; the

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adoption of secularism and religious disenchantment; the use of the scientific method as the predominant paradigm (as if never changing); the acceptance of the utter dominance of reason, rationality, and positivism; the emergence of the nation state; the assertion of universal human rights and universal values – and so on. Art, literature, fashion, mores, and hygiene concerns (the new manners as described by Norbert Elias, 1969) all become part of the rhetoric of modernity, leading to a self-celebratory promise of a new civilization.

Since the 70s, the resurgence of modernity studies started to occupy the framework of a “post-” condition. French philosophers and sociologists such as Lyotard, Bell, and Touraine have interrogated the features of a fundamental change from an industrial society to a programmed or communication society (Touraine 1971 [1969]; Castells 1996, 1977) in which identities and information appear to be more emphasized than the classic conflicts surrounding labor issues and control of the means of production (Touraine 1977 [1973]). Social science has for too long delineated modernity as a European discovery, thus delivering a modernity that is uniquely Western (White 1980; Goody 2006; Mignolo 2000, 2007). Since the 70s, disenchantment with the ideas of Progress and Reason as vectors of social evolution (Habermas 1980; Touraine 1995 [1992]) have become pivotal to the critique of modernity along with general doubts about “Grand Narratives” (Lyotard 1984 [1979]). Although the focus of some scholars has been on analyzing a radicalized modernity, *hyper-* rather than *post-* (Giddens 1990), characterized by risk and reflexivity (ibid.; Beck 1992), the social sciences have more recently come to reconsider or refute modernity as a unique condition (Goody 2006). Postcolonial studies in particular have successfully exposed modernity’s dominant narratives – including the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the nation state, and the processes of secularization – by reversing their crystallized ideas of uniqueness, exposing them as myths (Bhambra 2007). By theorizing multiple modernities (Göle 1996, 2000) and alternative modernities, Eisenstadt (2003) points out the need to consider contemporary interpretations of modernity and explore the connections between modernization and social and historical processes across the world. Global studies have likewise ushered in different perspectives based on connected history (Chakrabarty 2000) and connected sociology (Bhambra 2014).

If one of the main points of critiquing modernity is the failure of the coupling Progress/Modernity vis-à-vis the environment, it is also undeniable that collective actions are responding to ecological challenges using and



asserting the role of science and in doing so reaffirming modernity. At the same time, we are witnessing new approaches to the understanding of modernity that easily challenge and bewilder established certitudes about what we consider modern: the rise of religious fundamentalism, the indefatigability of tradition, the global diffusion of sociotechnical systems and their connections to the issues of global migrations and refugees, the prevalence of global conflicts and violence, the alarms over a certain “clash of civilizations,” the persistence of socio-economic inequities, the subversive relationships between scientific advancements and the environment (think fracking and Monsanto), between pharmaceuticals and wellness (Davis et al. 2014), and between social media and social connectivity (Turkle 2011; Castells 2012). The global consequences of this modernity, as Zigmund Bauman might argue (Bauman 1998), are valid issues for reconsidering our idea of progress so as to embrace the necessary and urgent changes that humanity needs right now.

How can one define modernity today? Now that we’re firmly in the twenty-first century and in the shadow of an age of globalization – and in the throes of a pandemic – what defines modernity? Is a definition possible, or even necessary? Bruno Latour’s question “are we really modern?” (1993) might stimulate a radical confutation of modernity and science. But what then is modernity after all? The global diffusion of sociotechnical systems of communication, including artificial intelligence (AI) with regard to democracy, is accompanied by a decline of classic institutions. By addressing the new challenge of democracy – and the role of “subjectivation” in affirming universal rights – Alain Touraine has asserted a renewed defense of modernity.

As for the common use of the term *modern*, we believe that a global update would require a rapid acknowledgement of its practical use. If our approach is interdisciplinary, then we cannot exclude the phenomenology of *modern* and its meanings. Besides, a reflexive society cannot exclude the implication of the entanglement between philosophy, sociology, and the self-evident experiences of individuals and groups. Commonly, the terms *modern* and *modernity* have been used in contradictory ways that at times seem to confuse certain philosophical and historical interpretations. The term *modernity* itself carries an intractable burden in its Eurocentric semantics and colonial heritage. When students are asked about what *modern* and *modernity* mean to them, their answers reveal a partial but necessary conception of the word. *Modern* and *modernity*, as they are used and imagined in our everyday life, are associated with the idea of newness, transformation, and a continuous movement forward. Materially



speaking, fashion, popular tastes, networked communication, AI, and applied technology also encompass the everyday sense of the term modernity. But this everyday usage also incorporates an imaginary of a better future, a constantly updated movement towards an unidentifiable *something new*. Among the connected generation, when the term *modern* is used in ordinary language today regardless of country, language, or culture, it seems to refer to the same universally-adopted meaning. Even if the specific referent of what is considered *modern* can vary (such as in fashion, taste, sense of style, and use of technology), ultimately the same signification is attached to the word in a way that refers to an imaginary of “novelty,” “innovation,” “transformation,” and being “unprecedented.” This simplistic and clichéd use of the term *modernity* cannot be brushed aside, though, as trivial and irrelevant in a holistic understanding of modernity today. Quite the opposite. Our argument here invites a more inclusive interpretation of modernity that is cognizant of different epistemological frameworks beyond just academic disciplinary debates.

In this sense, Georg Simmel’s observation about fashion in his *The Philosophy of Money* connects with the modern and modernity as a constant dynamic flow that is both cultural and consumable. In a way, fashion trends become markers of a modern status that is adopted by social groups causing dynamic flows from one social group to another.

We live in *the modern*. The modern penetrates all that we encounter, regardless of cultural differences, traditions, or political perspectives. Our connected world recognizes a form of modernity that applies to everybody at the same time, including religious or cultural communities, no matter how isolated they may be considered. In that sense, we can be modern by either producing modernity or by absorbing it – an idea reminiscent of Nilüfer Göle’s conceptualization of contact zones and their subsequent interpenetration (Göle 2015).

The common intuition of the term *modern* evidences a transnational and transcultural recognition of its globality. Modernity might be seen as a decentralized process that can be accessed from anywhere, by anyone. It can be triggered, processed, and/or produced by random actors from anywhere – in Japan or China, Syria, or Eastern Europe, in the Global South or Australia. The ubiquitous nature of modernity can only be interrupted by failures in processes of communication and translation.

This book aims to promote decentered and cross-disciplinary perspectives, a potentially multipositional stance that would help us in grasping and grappling with the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities that



characterize modernity at present. The book goes beyond theory by applying specific empirical and case-based research approaches in each contribution. The ultimate purpose of this work is to bring together diverse practical meanings of modernity, modernism, and modernization not as a single voice but a polyphony. As such, the reader, already under a modern condition that is ever changing, will find new tools/methodologies for understanding contemporary ethics, conflicts, religion, bureaucracy, literature, technology, science, and the environment.

This project started when the “normal” world was characterized by rising forms of populism around the world, when skepticism about science and the political support in which it is cushioned became rampant, conspiracy theories proliferated on social media, and new forms of direct democracy were attempted through online platforms. As we write this, we are still witnessing the same phenomena. In the midst of the pandemic of the twenty-first century, we are still facing instability, societal fractures, and the affirmation of new modes of communication. Systemic global powers still dominate people’s everyday lives, benefiting from weak and underprepared local, national, regional, and global political institutions. We might identify these powers in (1) financial flows, (2) the allocation of investments on a global scale, and (3) technoscientific models as experienced in the fields of medicine and foodstuffs (Farro and Maddanu 2020). At the same time, other alternatives are gaining increasing recognition from civil society: from the common goods (Olstrom 2001; Harvey 2012) to sovereignty, from new environmental activism to pro-migrant movements, and so on. New superpowers like China or India have emerged, challenging Western dominance without introducing their own original model, but just playing in a more interdependent economy dominated by financial capitals that have brought new uncertainties among individuals, precariousness, and an eventual weakening of the fundamental basis of democracy. However, innovation and cultural trends can rise in different places in the world. Today, *the global* defines a multiplicity of cultural practices (rational and spiritual), fashions and manners that are sedimenting a process of global “interpenetration” (to use Nilüfer Göle’s concept) and *provincializing* a Eurocentric modernization process (Chakrabarty 2000). Modernity itself lies in the making of a global hybridization of meaning and practices that could otherwise be defined as disjunctive cultural flows (Appadurai 1990, 1998). The COVID-19 pandemic and its widespread scope can be seen as an ultimate testbench of a global modernity.





## Pandemic and the Institution

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Its Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said,

Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.

Describing the situation as a pandemic does not change WHO's assessment of the threat posed by this virus. It doesn't change what WHO is doing, and it doesn't change what countries should do.

We have never before seen a pandemic sparked by a coronavirus. This is the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus.

And we have never before seen a pandemic that can be controlled, at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

Epidemics throughout history have shown the connectedness of the human condition. The Black Death (1346–53) spread around the world by trade routes and travelers – from east to west, through the Silk Road and the Golden Horde, from port to port in the Mediterranean – leading to extraordinary social changes in different sectors, such as the economy, banking systems, medical knowledge and practice (Deming 2012), religious beliefs,<sup>2</sup> women's role, and worker opportunities.<sup>3</sup> The very scope of that pandemic – including its high death rate and consequent population reduction (an estimated one-third of the European population died) – affected human relations, mentalities, and beliefs and altered social structures and roles (Gottfried

1 WHO Director-General 2020.

2 Apocalyptic and fatalist religious approaches made it harder for doctors and medical practitioners to prevent further spread of such epidemics. For instance, flagellism in Europe (Gottfried 1983, 63–69; Deming 2012, 17) or the fatalist acceptance of God-Will in the Islamic world (Gottfried, 74; Byrne 2006, 261–64).

3 Large demographic reductions caused by the plague in Europe, and especially in Italy, led to new labor relations, which resulted in more opportunities and better worker conditions. As noted by Robert Gottfried, “Any lord who hoped to keep his workers had to offer them better terms of tenure than they had had before the Black Death. By the 1360s, this had resulted in much lower rents in most of western Europe. This development was followed by the commutation of traditional labor and boon services, that is, the substitution of cash payments for old labor services. Then, in the course of the fifteenth century, most of the other labor services and many of the banalities were eliminated, replaced by money rates and long-term leases. In effect, while the lords still owned the land or held it of a higher lord, they did so with hired labor rather than unfree peasants holding on customary tenure” (Gottfried 1983, 118).

1983; Byrne 2006; Cantor 2001). Even if one is to argue that exceptional epidemics, like the Black Death, were not the direct cause of all major societal changes at the time, there is no doubt that they certainly contributed to and accelerated many of those changes. Mentality and everyday life behaviors were obviously affected: according to Deming, the “dire circumstances reinforced cynicism, skepticism, and the pursuit of self-interest” (2012, 10), as a sort of fatalist *mors tua vita mea*.

Although not the result of planned or pragmatic institutional reform, several fundamental societal changes were a posteriori effects or related outcomes of the pandemic, crystalizing new social practices including social manners and hygiene.<sup>4</sup> Neither formal nor informal institutions of any kind were able to plan or configure these changes as a way out of the pandemic in its entirety. Even as public health concerns started to require exceptional powers, scientific failings and public skepticism continued to undermine efficacious solutions to the problem of countering epidemics. Medical practices remained intermingled with religious beliefs in early attempts at tackling epidemics. For instance, the definition of “quarantine” meaning “forty” days (in Italian *quaranta*) – indicating the time required for purification – was mostly based on language and practices found in Christian scriptures (Snowden 2019, 70).

It was only after the appearance of the modern state and its apparatus that we start witnessing the first successful strategic measures to tackle plagues and prepare for their possible future threats:

The outline of the antiplague system was established during the early epidemic cycles of the second pandemic, and it then became increasingly sophisticated and comprehensive through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Initially, the weakness of the system was that it was local in scope. The quantum leap that made the system effective and led to success was taken in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the emerging early modern state, which backed the effort with bureaucratic and military power and extended coverage over a larger geographical area than one city alone. (Snowden 2019, 69)

Although large-scale epidemics usually engender terror, skepticism, and superstitions among the population, it is believed that epidemics also eventually lead to the affirmation of the use of reason and increased adoption of the scientific method (Gottfried 1983, 131–35). It could be said that epidemics

4 See Norbert Elias 1969.

accelerate paradigmatic transition. However, it could not be argued that the dark times of a medieval age suddenly disappeared due to the pandemic or that it delivered the unexpected triumph of Reason. The affirmation of Reason remained contingent upon social acceptance – which was never consistent even at best. On the contrary, in almost every region affected by the plague, the people were reluctant in their acceptance of plague-fighting measures. Authorities' restrictions of different social activities (stay-at-home quarantines, restrictions on funerals, gatherings, etc.) were challenged, in much the way modern public health measures are challenged, even today in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reactions and resistances to both scientific knowledge and political decisions are not a proof of a total rejection of Reason and the ideals of the Enlightenment. Even in a hypertechnological communications society (Castells 1996) in which we live today, we cannot claim with certainty that we have become a society that celebrates the supremacy of Reason, Science, and Justice. Maybe for the same reasons, we are unable to realize Habermas's concept of *ideal communication* that would be capable of a *restorative justice* in the public sphere. Instead, we continue to witness the cyclical rise and eventual fall of authoritarian and Orwellian figures capable of mystifying reality and making millions of people believe in ready-made conspiracies or anti-scientific theories. The triad of Reason, Science, and Justice does not affirm its ontological universality automatically and per se, but must struggle to be culturally understood and socially legitimated.

From the rats to the bats and the pangolins, the effects of urbanization and human mobility, both during the early industrialization and in the post-Fordist megacities, reveal new threats and old sins – in a sense, human ventures and environmental responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> On December 31, 2019, Chinese authorities issued a statement to the media reporting a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei province, which were eventually identified as a novel coronavirus strain. The discovery of the COVID-19 coronavirus ushered in a vast and unprecedented global reaction. It quickly became evident that the virus was a global problem that required global solutions. Responses all around the world have shown different approaches but common challenges. In January 2020, national authorities in China announced that even though the new coronavirus would be categorized as a Class B infectious disease, they would start

5 At the time we are writing (June 2021), there are still doubts about the cause that originally spread the virus in Wuhan.

adopting Class A measures.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, other Asian countries confirmed their first cases. Travel restrictions and border closures took place in several countries, such as Mongolia and Russia, followed by others in Europe weeks later. Drastic measures like the lockdown of entire cities and regions were initiated in various countries. Italy which, after facing the biggest outbreak in the world outside of China, declared a national lockdown on March 9, 2020. At that time, China's public health officials were received in Italy to share expertise and policies to counter the spread of the virus.

Observers were not surprised to see Chinese citizens' compliance with draconian government-imposed measures to counter the coronavirus epidemic. The Chinese bureaucratic apparatus mobilized securitarian measures implying a "state of exception" (Agamben 2005 [2003], 2009) to rationalize the control of bodies and space. Meanwhile in Italy for the first time ever, the authorities issued total lockdown measures in every city and region in the country. Here too, citizens were overwhelmingly quick to accept these measures in a display of a high level of compliance. The different forms of government as well as the respective cultural inclinations of China and Italy offer a unique opportunity for comparison. At that time, civil liberties took second place to public health in China as well as in Italy.

After weeks of public solidarity among the populations under lockdown and support for such "courageous" measures, controversies and new alternative approaches began to gain visibility in public spheres. Throughout the world, a dichotomy emerged between civil liberties (and their economic ramifications) and public health measures.<sup>7</sup> New skepticisms, some supported by scientific experts, started to call for reconsideration of restrictive measures (facemask mandates, business closures, restrictions on movement, public gatherings, etc.).

Suspicious public reactions to government scientists' inconsistent responses to COVID-19 threatened to undermine the already weakened public trust in scientific knowledge and the reliability of science. In fact, the gradual and not always consistent discoveries made by scientists about the ways in which coronavirus was being transmitted exposed a certain fragility in the foundations of scientific knowledge. It became increasingly clear that

6 "According to the Infectious Disease Prevention Act of China, the infectious diseases are classified into three types, namely, Classes A, B, and C, which are defined as legal infectious diseases. Legal infectious diseases are infectious diseases whose prevention, control, and treatment are guaranteed by laws." (Liu et al. 2015).

7 Perhaps the most notorious case is Sweden, whose response model still encounters criticism and support.

scientific discovery was a process and not a final conclusion. Moreover, public health management requires a form of scientific vulgarization that must be filtered through the logic of the daily news with its often misleading simplifications. As such, the scientist, as the face of public communication, must face the complex demands of balancing scientific ethics with public interest: for example, health officials minimizing the efficacy of facemasks in order to avoid a general rush on buying facemasks that could jeopardize adequate supplies of PPE (personal protective equipment) to the medical community. The seemingly changing and at times contradictory public statements by medical scientists relating to various aspects of the pathology and contagiousness of the coronavirus only serve to illustrate the dynamic nature of science itself as paradigmatically a process more than a fixed truth.

On the opposite side of this issue, a self-educating public began to challenge the roles of institutions and the very status of scientific knowledge, exposing another side of the reflexivity of society. These challenges took the form of convulsive communication on alternative news sources and continuous flows of messages through social media.

The constant massaging of the scientific communication to appease and appeal to the general public or government officials shows how science, even when operated by scientists, remains a social construct, a continuous adaptation of societal knowledge and expectations – as Bruno Latour would observe.

This widening gap between science and its acceptance by society needs to be filled by ethical principles that can ensure the protection of life as fundamental to everything we do. Only a modern public health that combines scientific knowledge with the common good could fulfill this objective.

By downplaying the dangers of COVID-19, certain segments of the population have directly challenged the ethical idea of public health. As such, we see groups of people openly opposing different generational interests, invoking individual privileges, and posing public risks. Indeed, statistics show a great divide in COVID-19 mortality and risk factors that are based on age.<sup>8</sup> This divide enables certain societal groups to selfishly reject personal sacrifices that are quite necessary for public safety.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the very

8 About 80 percent of all deaths related to COVID-19 have affected people who are 65 years or older; 60 percent are 75 years or older. For more details, see US CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), National Center for Health Statistics website, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/COVID\\_weekly/index.htm#AgeAndSex](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/COVID_weekly/index.htm#AgeAndSex) (accessed January 10, 2021).

9 Young people's massive gatherings, parties, and raves (more or less secret) are registered all around the world, in some cases justified as a necessary way to cope with social isolation and containment measures.



idea of the importance of public health and the common good is completely negated by a whole theatre of eugenics believers, conspiracy theorists, herd-immunity promoters, and plain old cynics.<sup>10</sup> Along with that, concerns about the short-term effects of anti-COVID measures on the economy have repeated the same scenarios we have been dealing with since the beginning of the pandemic, namely environment/health vs. the economy. If these recurring trends reveal anything, it is that they are incapable of changing the status quo.

While imagining new modern institutions, it is ironic, or maybe substantial and intrinsic to our crises, that current modern institutions in the Western world are facing an epochal challenge never witnessed since the end of World War II. The rise of conspiracy theories, alternative truths, and *fake news* and the *deepfake* are just some of the extremes of a prevalent trend. The perceptual distance between ordinary people and the so-called elite governments and state institutions continues to widen. At a time of accelerated communication and social-networked, even non-political institutions such as science, the media, and education – that is, the academic and intellectual spheres – become subject to discredit and skepticism, leading to an expansion and strengthening of populism. What we view as populism today is different from a traditional, rural, and agrarian populism (Canovan 1981) or from a sense of postcolonial nationalist pride, like what we might witness in Latin America (Germani 1978). Instead, the populism we face today embraces a popular sense of incertitude and instability. Scholars today distinguish left populism (Mouffe 2018; Gerbaudo 2017) from right-wing populism (Fitzi et al. 2019a). In most cases, a common “gut-feeling” takes comfort in authoritarian characters (Stockemer 2019; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018) who promise a return to the old homogeneous body that constituted society (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Farro and Maddanu 2020). Through social media and political leaders, this new populism spreads globally. Places like the Philippines, India, Brazil, the United States, Turkey, Eastern and Western Europe, and so on, all face trends of populism that oppose some principles of globalization, but also manifest an absence or a lack of control of one’s own life in a complex world. Populism builds its popularity on the overwhelming sense of uncertainty and anxiety that lies in a spinning globe. But what has been defined as “popular populism” refers to populism as a narrative, more than a specific political agenda (Farro and Maddanu 2020, 127). It is important to remark that the literature in the social sciences about

10 Among the most extravagant, the alleged correlation between the arrival of the 5G networks and COVID-19; or more simply, that COVID-19 does not exist. See Lewandowsky and Cook, 2020.

populism has been increasing, considerably in the past few years, making this subject popular in engaging with the current crises of democracy (Fitzi et al. 2019b; Wallace and Smith 2007).

Populism is a term that encapsulates the vanishing trust in “the elites” that is closely accompanied by the rise of the extended use of open networks and social media. However, when colossal companies that own communication platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Google, or Amazon began to elect themselves as censors of fake news and eventually rise as guardians of democracy, users started deserting these platforms for new and alternative outlets like Parler, Telegram, and Signal.<sup>11</sup>

The populist voice challenges social institutions in their certitudes and technical knowledge, including climate change, vaccines, and the use of cancer therapies. These new forms of populism highlight an ever widening gulf between the everyday life of ordinary people and the systemic forces created by neoliberal policies, financial flows, and technoscientific models. In a climate of constant crisis for representative democracy, the axiom “We the People” becomes the harbinger of authoritarian political figures who lead with a rhetoric of fear, hatred, and delusion in the name of *the people*.

It is remarkable to observe that in that matrix, the descriptive “global” is commonly heard in the public sphere as the processing of a hypercommunication flow, inclusive of AI technologies (especially in financial markets), delocalization of the economy, and instability. Thus, these connections – which pair with *laissez-faire* and lack of political control, meaning states and their institutions – facilitate a pervasive financialization that takes over the total economy of the world. An alternative and more comprehensive sense of the global, then, gets locked into tangled systemic forces associated with today’s financial capitalism, leading to ever widening global inequalities (Piketty 2017, 574–84). Society still seems to be at the service of the economy, rather than the other way around. What we can observe is the detachment of the state and social systems from the workings of the economy itself. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic also expose the question of priorities in society where a false dichotomy brings economic interests to prevail over people’s health. Modern societies face a strain between people’s health and productivity. Whether they are at-risk workers in a highly polluting

11 In the aftermath of the attacks on the capitol in Washington during the election certification, Twitter suspended permanently the US president’s account (January 8, 2021), Facebook banned him until the end of his term (January 7, 2021), while Amazon terminated its services to Parler (January 11, 2021), a Trumper right-wing microblog and social network that was previously banned on both the Apple and Google App stores.

factory or plant, or the local population surrounding these same areas, the dilemma between economic survival (corporate interests) and individual or environmental health is on the balance.

## Connecting Modernities

By theorizing multiple modernities and alternative modernities, contributors to this volume point out the need to consider contemporary interpretations of modernity, including religious and secular. Furthermore, they explore the connections between modernization and social and historical processes around the world, including the scope of the colonial endeavor in dominant practices, bureaucratized institutions, and ideologies.

### Part I – Modernity as We Know It: Narratives of Modernity across the Disciplines

Part I of the book describes and situates classic applications and narratives of modernity and modernization in their empirical and ideological extents. Contributors engage with the concept of modernity from the respective coordinates of both their discipline and their geography. This part has been conceived as a descriptive laboratory of analysis of how modernity is transliterated into narratives and thus dominant ideologies, but also attitudes and visual perceptions. Maybe the most eclectic part of this collection, Part I invites scholars in mathematics, sociology of science, history, philosophy, and visual theory to contribute towards a foundation of a new cross-disciplinary corpus. These seemingly disparate and traditionally disconnected narratives could be envisioned as a preliminary opportunity to resituate possible disciplinary implications of the modern within the same intellectual milieu.

In “Technology and the Texture of Modernity,” Alessandro Mongili retraces the distinction between traditional and modern technologies as a classical theme in social studies. Through the lens of science, technology, and society studies (STS), the author argues that technologies are not mere artifacts, but also “sociotechnical networks.” He observes that any multiple assemblage operates at a technical level through standardization, and at a human and social level through habits, conventions, and practices. In the vein of the classic scientific and philosophical debates around the observation of nature, truth, reality, and methods, Lucio Cadeddu introduces modern perspectives and narratives in mathematics. “Math and Modernity: Critical Reflections”





explains the evolution, criticism, and rejection of modern mathematics and abstract mathematics in regard to research and education.

In “Stranded Modernity: Post-war Hiroshima as Discursive Battlefield,” Daishiro Nomiya presents the case of Hiroshima in the post-World War II period. From a socio-historical perspective, high modernity considers that the modern nation state created an ultramilitary state that continues even after wartime. In this sense, some scholars think of the peacetime after World War II as a disjuncture. However, the unfolding of Japanese modernity faces opposition in the form of “anti-modern” forces, notably in the controversy about the city memorial in Hiroshima, the Atomic-Bomb Dome. Nomiya notes that in Japan, “Modernity did make progress, but was stranded.”

Housamedden Darwish considers the age-old question of Islam and modernity in his chapter “The (In)Compatibility of Islam with Modernity: (Mis)Understanding of Secularity/Secularism in the Arab/Islamicate Worlds.” Darwish lays out the foundation of a theoretical and methodological framework for approaching the concept of secularity/secularism and draws upon the work of leading Arab scholars who are particularly interested in the relationship between secularity and democracy. Darwish proposes the civil-state concept “as a potential deconstructing concept” of the “secular state/religious state” dichotomy.

In the “Missing Body: Figurative Representations in Islamic Iconography,” Hatem N. Akil considers the presumed absence of figurative representations in Islamic art which to some critics is yet another indication of Islam’s inability to face and represent reality (accept modernity) – as opposed to the body-centric esthetics of the Renaissance. Akil discovers that, on the contrary, Islamic history in fact overflows with one example after another of representations of sentient life. The connection between Islam’s figurative art (as an indicator of the secular) with abstract and geometric art (as an indicator of the sacred) should not be seen as a contradiction. Indeed, it should be “taken as evidence of a cultural simultaneity that reflects the diversity of cultures, languages, traditions, even theological beliefs that constitute *lived Islam*, which has always been both religious and secular at the same time.”

## Part II – Modernity under Fire: Critiques, Challenges, and Revisions

Critiques of modernity come from decolonial and sociological approaches that engage with postcolonial studies and modernization theories, exposing modernity’s dominant narratives as forms of social, economic, and cultural control. Global studies likewise ushers in different perspectives based



on connected history and connected sociology. Responding to ecological challenges, classic and contemporary social movements have asserted the role of science in order to face ecological issues. And by doing so, these movements are reaffirming modernity

In Part II, we consider critiques, challenges, and revisions of modernity from the respective vantage points of different disciplines. The contributions collected in this part address modernity and modernization through the lenses of post-coloniality, decoloniality, and alter-modernity. The colonial aspect of modernity is entangled with the logics of bureaucratic institutions, political or military (Esu and Maddanu). The crucial significance of the case studies and essays in this part lies in their dissection of institutions and the structuration of society and its consequences in general. This includes the cultural aspects behind forms of hegemony, dependence, and marginality (Sustam) produced by the coupled modernity-modernization. Furthermore, Part II brings up more proactive criticism against modernization as a narrative of progress and development. A different challenge of what a global process of modernization has engendered also allows for critical reflection on anti-Western political and religious movements. By criticizing modernity as an exclusively-Western invention, these movements engage with a fight against modernity and its principles in order to support a postcolonial agenda (Fatima and Jacobson). Modernity is challenged – not only criticized – as a colonial invention, but also as a fundamental concept that nevertheless, if revised, could produce advancements towards a common good. These revisions might highlight other aspects of modernity that justify its reaffirmation.

In Chapter 7, “Criticism of “Colonial Modernity” through the Kurdish Decolonial Approaches,” Engin Sustam invites us to “reread the colonial epistemes of modernity, whether or not focused on the West.” Sustam theorizes the Kurdish political movement in the way it defines a new interpretation of modernity based on the critique of colonialism and global capitalism, calling it *democratic modernity*.

By analyzing the case of the military occupation of Sardinia, Aide Esu and Simone Maddanu posit rhetorics and narratives of modernity and modernization that accompany the settlement of military bases on different islands around the world. In their chapter “Conflicting Modernities: Militarization and Islands,” the authors explore two dimensions of militarization: the economic, on the one hand; and the social, cultural, and ideological dimension, on the other. They describe a conflictual public space between a bureaucratized form of control that includes colonial characteristics, and the local population’s claims for autonomy and an alternative modernity.



In their chapter “Project Modernity: From Anti-colonialism to Decolonization,,” Shumaila Fatima and David Jacobson explore convergences and differences of three main anti-colonial and postcolonial movements around the world: nationalist, Marxist, and Islamist. In particular, the authors highlight how the role of education and the meaning of history are at the core of *anti-* or *post-*colonization processes, as seen in different perspectives and narratives. In some cases, the unfolding of these processes involves resistance and reaction to contemporary civic and political models, but also their embodiment.

### Part III – In the Shadow of Pandemic

In Part III of this volume, we reflect on the new global challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic, a global threat that changed our everyday lives and pushed us to reconsider the way we live and the role of institutions vis-à-vis the individual. Chapters in this part directly engage with the very idea of modernity as it confronts a major threat to the species. Some of the most fundamental tenets of modernity are leitmotifs in these contributions: rationality, scientific values, ethical choices, and personal and public responsibilities. This part features reflections on the response of public health institutions to COVID-19 (Cooper), but also new questions called upon to address the themes of individual responsibility (Dobbins) as well as the fragility of the human condition in its confrontation with a pandemic (ID Yassine and Mesa).

The entanglement of environmental sciences, biology, and social science is at the core of Elizabeth G. Dobbins’ chapter, “Modernity and Decision-Making for Global Challenges.” Dobbins retraces the nature of previous epidemics and their extent, both from the scientific and human points of view. She observes that although human-created environmental crises and global pandemics are not unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their recent, catastrophic manifestations (climate change and COVID disease) have their roots in modernity. Disregarding the optimistic approach that sees humans and science always oriented towards “the solution,” Dobbins argues that a communal solution requires a synergic effort from both individuals (i.e. individual responsibility) and from governmental or transgovernmental agencies (i.e. policymakers and decision-makers). She concludes that COVID-19 might lead to a redefinition of the individual’s role in modernity.

In the chapter “Public Health Confronts Modernity in the Shadow of the Pandemic,” Richard Cooper addresses ethical questions about the role



of public health in society and the priority of its global dimension. Dr. Cooper introduces an informed medical perspective that encompasses modern studies on genetics, cardiovascular disease and epidemiology. By criticizing the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Cooper operates in an interdisciplinarity that interweaves clinical knowledge, societal analysis, and ethical perspectives. He argues that “[a]s consumer societies move further toward the full embrace of individualism and technologically-based lifestyle, traditional public health has been marginalized and must contend with both the ethos of ‘personal choice’ and monopoly capital, and how those forces influence the priorities of the political elite.”

By problematizing collective and individual identity and nature, Rachid ID Yassine and Beatriz Mesa approach the new dimensions of modernity that are arising in the midst of the pandemic. They see the emergence of a post-pandemic world, in which fragility, vulnerability, and uncertainty conquer every social group in society. According to ID Yassin and Mesa the contemporary idea of security has also collapsed in societies that no longer seem secure, predictable, and under control.

#### **Part IV – Imagining New Global Frameworks: Democracy and the Modernity-to-Come**

The last part of the book focuses on the urgency of finding new modalities of a democracy-to-come. Particularly, by retracing the social movements that have accompanied the critique of the exemptionalist Western paradigm, social movement studies underscores the need for another orientation of modernity that is cognizant of the issues of the environment (Farro). Following different approaches and objects of observation, the contributors in this part highlight ruptures, controversies, and conflictual aspects of a globalized society that have to do with accelerating flows of communication in the public sphere. From conspiracy theories to e-participation, institutions and individuals appear to struggle with the cacophony of a networked society. The political spectrum is now marred by messages that are in a constant state of shifts and changes. Users of social networks and other platforms can participate in producing and corrupting information in a constant state of growth and flux. In this context, populist leaders emerge as successful storytellers, who, by doing so, also seize, control, and transform the very tools of a modern democratic society. In the midst of a controversial public debate involving topics such as the individual vs. the collective, and liberty vs. control, the use of AI in the practice of direct democracy brings to light the potentials and limits of



current platforms of communication and political participation (Silaghi). However, the same tools that grant wider access to public participation can also be co-opted by populist ferments that flagrantly undermine science and rationality (Mauer). Amid this crisis of the institutions of democracy, Part IV calls for a complete re-envisioning of the future, a future that is cognizant of the strength of a modernity-to-come. In this mode of modernity, dominated individuals and groups will find a path towards the “subjectivation of the self” as a creative process of liberation and ethical self-assertion (Touraine).

Chapter 13 retraces the environmental movements from their beginning in the early 70s to the latest global experiences inspired by the teenage activist Greta Thunberg. Despite the idea of environmental and naturalist movements as a consequence of the decline of the idea of modernity and progress, Antimo Luigi Farro shows how these movements advocate the role of science in society and represent a critical consciousness of modernity. In Farro’s view, these considerations are even more appropriate in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his chapter, “The Cognitive Immune System: The Mind’s Ability to Dispel Pathological Beliefs,” Barry Mauer introduces the theory of the *cognitive immune system* and discusses the affordances and limits of the metaphor to medical epidemiology. Mauer addresses the vulnerability of institutions to pathological beliefs and behaviors. He argues that the modern liberal approach to diagnosing and treating pathological beliefs and behaviors has failed. He cites as an example the assault of two pandemics: the coronavirus, a physical virus; and the right-wing cult, a cognitive virus. Mauer calls for a “cognitive” immune system to face dangerous beliefs, anti-science, and anti-truth. He concludes by proposing a heuristic approach to the world we will face during and after the pandemic.

In the chapter entitled “Representative Democracy as Kitsch, and Artificial Intelligence’s Promise of Emancipation, and Artificial Intelligence’s Promise of Emancipation,” Marius Silaghi engages with the application of AI to online platforms for political participation. This platform, Democracy 2.0, constitutes a decentralized community of practice, an avant-garde and social media that challenges the current idea of representative democracy to move toward a more direct form democracy. Silaghi’s chapter explores relations between modernity and the decentralization of authority. He notes that “the system of representative democracy accompanying early modernity, by giving the masses an almost effortless sense of participation – features associated with *kitsch*[...] promises to become more genuine through the opportunities of electronic civic involvement.”



Alain Touraine, author of *The Post-industrial Society* (1971) and *Critique of Modernity*, writes the final contribution to this volume. Touraine's recent publication *In Defense of Modernity* (2018) posits modernity as necessary to protect the universal assertion of ethics. In his essay here, Touraine offers a unique reflection on the future of democracy and a glimpse at what he terms *hypermodernity*. After reminding social actors of "their responsibility and capacity to act," Touraine analyses what he terms the four necessary domains of subjectivation: the rediscovery of the individual and the Subject of subjectivation, the question of women, the issue of refugees and migrants, and the domain of democracy and fundamental human rights. Touraine's essay addresses our fundamental contemporary crisis and also shows the potential that subjectivation has in liberating the individual from forms of dominance. The "Subject" described in Touraine's sociology is defined as "the assertion, whose forms vary, of human beings' freedom and capacity to create themselves and to transform themselves individually and collectively" (Touraine 2007, 5).

## Conclusions

The ultimate purpose of this volume is to focus our reflections on the urgent need to update the shifting epistemological, social, cultural, and political meanings of modernity today. We discuss how the pandemic carries the possibility (threat? opportunity?) of a *tabula rasa* condition: the possibility of a civilizational detour based on a foundation of global citizenship, and the need for global problem-solving strategies, new global ethics, and a global resource management paradigm that is solidly cognizant of the commons and the need for redistribution. In our final remarks we will attempt to update a necessary assertion for a global modernity. The Touranian Subject and its related process of subjectivation can then be understood as the *awakening* force that liberates the individual and makes him/her/them the "creative" actor of a positive change of his/her/their present and future. However, in order to defend modernity, a clear distinction must be made between the mere process of modernization and the dream of harmonizing rationality, creativity, social justice, and spirituality. In the shadow of catastrophe and in the midst of predominant precariousness and uncertainty, a keen awareness of the universal ethics of justice and equity is called upon as the fundamental orientation and horizon of our human condition. This awakening – like in the "daydream" described in Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope* – can be seen as the necessary creative, spiritual, and practical subjective assertion for a new global modernity, the modernity-to-come.



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