A Newer, More Radical, Modernity: Prolegomena to a Politics of the Potential

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Dear reader,

This is an article which picks up and develops some of my “why Europe was first” ideas. This is the abstract:

Radical politics in modern society was premised on a constructivist ontology which now increasingly has been abandoned in favor of political solutions based on an ontology of self-organization. As a result, radical politics is in decline. Yet the self-organizing model is unable to explain the most salient feature of modern society — the relentlessness and automaticity of social change. Change can only be explained by an ontology which focuses on the self-actualization of the potential. This alternative ontology can also serve as the foundation for a new form of radical politics.

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Erik
A Newer, More Radical, Modernity: Prolegomena to a Politics of the Potential

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Abstract: Radical politics in modern society was premised on a constructivist ontology which now increasingly has been abandoned in favor of political solutions based on an ontology of self-organization. As a result, radical politics is in decline. Yet the self-organizing model is unable to explain the most salient feature of modern society — the relentlessness and automaticity of social change. Change can only be explained by an ontology which focuses on the self-actualization of the potential. This alternative ontology can also serve as the foundation for a new form of radical politics.

Contemporary politics is limited both in scope and ambition. The traditional political ideologies, cemented after the French Revolution, are dissolving and all that remains is a diffuse kind of centrist politics focusing on the administration of things and on the implementation of best practices. Increasingly politicians have given up on substance altogether and focus instead on symbolic issues. As everyone seems to agree, there is little or nothing that politics can do to make our societies radically better, more equal or just. Meanwhile the power of the state is eroding through a combination of external pressures and internal retrenchment. In this way our decreasing ambitions are pushed by our declining abilities into a downward spiral where politics is emptied of all content. And even if you can take issue with some of these conclusions, it is difficult to dispute the general trend.

Social theory is in a similar state of crisis. Since the Enlightenment various grand theories have provided comprehensive accounts of the social world. As these theories

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made clear, society does not merely consist of individual objects or events and history is not just "one damn thing after another." Instead society has an overall organization which can be rationally comprehended and a history which can be told as a story of unidirectional progress. Moreover these accounts can be used to critically assess existing social arrangements. And yet today few people are prepared to defend such bold claims.² Deeply buried in their respective specialisms, scholars do not on the whole reach overarching conclusions. The kind of theorizing that remains concerns itself with micro rather than macro levels and it tends to be supportive of existing power hierarchies rather than be critical of them. Meanwhile public life — politics, the economy, the arts — has increasingly descended to the level of biography. Uninformed by theoretical outlooks, political convictions are more than ever a matter of lifestyles choices.

These two trends are related. Political action and social theory were both premised on the idea of society understood as a human construct. Through rational plans and rational actions society can be transformed and improved. Yet there was always something wrong with this constructivist ontology. No matter how well-conceived the plans, they rarely worked out the way they were intended and even the most knowledgeable experts and hard-working government officials found it difficult to make the world conform to their visions. The problem, critics argue, is that society is too diverse, too complex, and that too much of the knowledge required for successful planning simply is not available. Political intervention leads to economic inefficiency, infringements on the rights of individuals, or worse. But, the critics assert, there is an alternative. Instead of collective planning we should rely on the plans made by individuals. Doing this, we will find that they come to develop their own ways of adjusting to each other. The prime example of such self-organization takes place in economic markets. Reorganizing one social sphere after

² The official announcement of the “end of meta narratives” is of course Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, 7–9.
another on the model of the market, social life will become ever more efficient and individuals will have the freedom to organize their lives as they themselves see fit.

The reason why social thought and political action are in crisis is that the ontology of self-organization largely has come to replace the ontology of constructivism. Neither social thought nor political action is much in demand in a society which organizes itself. The aim of this article is to critically analyze this apparent success. The strategy will be to confront the self-organizing ontology with what surely must be its greatest embarrassment: the inability to explain social change. Whatever else they might be, modern societies are societies in which change is both relentless and automatic, yet the ontology of self-organization cannot convincingly explain why this is the case. Indeed, the market model cannot even explain long-term economic growth. This surprising failure forces us to look elsewhere for an explanation. What is needed, we will argue, is an ontology which is open to the new and unexpected; it is by actualizing the potential — that which is not, but could be — that societies change. This is also why the economy grows. Instead of an ontology of self-organization we need an ontology of self-actualization. Societies which we call modern are more than anything societies in which self-actualization has become relentless and automatic.

Yet, as we will go on to argue, potentialities are not actualized by themselves. In order for change to become a permanent feature of society, we need to rely on institutions. Modern societies, from this point of view, are societies in which change is institutionalized. Yet since many institutions impede rather than encourage change, not just any institutions will do. In fact, and as we will see, a rather specific combination of

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4 See further Ringmar, *Why Europe Was First*; Also published as Ringmar, *Mechanics of Modernity*.

5 Differently put, Castoriadis’ account needs to be complemented by work which emphasizes the contributions of institutions. E.g. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*; or Hamilton, “Institution.”
institutions is required. It was when this combination of institutions rather fortuitously came together in Europe after the year 1500 that the foundations for a modern society were established. There is a political program here, we will argue in conclusion, not just a research agenda. A self-actualizing ontology — a “politics of the potential” — provides new opportunities both for social thought and political action and thereby a way to continue the radical project of modernity.

**Constructivism vs. catallaxy**

The constructivist ontology is based on two interrelated and mutually supportive notions. First that human beings, as the ones who create society, are in a unique position to understand it. Second, that this understanding provides us with the knowledge we need in order to make and remake society in accordance with our own preferred designs. The more we transform society, the better we understand it, and the better we understand it, the more thoroughly we are able to transform it. "[T]he world of civil society has certainly been made by men," as Giambattista Vico put it in 1744, "and its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our human mind." The metaphorical underpinnings of this ontology are architectural. Society is a building which political action can "destroy," "construct" or "reconstruct," and the theories which describe this society are constructions too — they are "solid," well or badly "founded," "constructed" or "supported." Just as carpenters draw up a blueprint before they start working, social reformers draw up overall plans which continuously are referred to as the reforms are implemented. This is why revolutionaries "build" socialism,

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8 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 46; Cf. Ringmar, “Metaphors of Social Order.”
9 As Arendt points out, *eidos* — the etymological root of “idea” — originally referred to the blueprints used by carpenters. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 104.
"make" a better world, and why reform-minded politicians become "nation-builders" or the "founders" of health-care-, pensions- or school systems.

A constructivist ontology underlies our modern idea of a "revolution." Originally a revolution was defined as a movement along the trajectory of a historical cycle. The relevant metaphor was astrological: just as the revolutions of the stars always followed the same paths, the history of a society revolved in a circular pattern. Modern revolutions, from the French Revolution onward, have lost this etymological connection and replaced the astronomical ontology with a constructivist one. The aim of modern revolutionaries is not to return to a previous state but instead to construct something newer and better, following their own preferred designs. In much the same way constructivism makes sense of the idea of "reform." Consider the persistent attempts over the last half century to "modernize" not-yet-modern parts of the world. The exact definition of modernization has varied from one expert to the next, and so have the means of achieving it, but regardless of the definition modernization has always entailed the implementation of some overall scheme. Hence the five-year plans implemented in various Communist regimes, Stalin's dekulakization campaigns in the 1930s, forced villagization in Romania and Tanzania, or for that matter the construction of the dreary banlieues of Paris, Berlin or Stockholm.

In the end little turned out the way the proponents of the constructivist ontology envisioned. Not all revolutions failed to be sure and not all reforms went awry, yet even the best laid plans rarely if ever turned out the way they were expected, and occasionally the outcomes were disastrous, even genocidal. The question is why. The most convenient answer — the one die-hard constructivists prefer — is that the plans should have been better thought through and better implemented. A more troubling possibility is that the ontology itself is at fault. Society, an increasingly more vocal band of critics has argued, is

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11 A classical account is Becker, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers, 119–68.
12 As chronicled by Scott, Seeing Like a State; Cf. Scott, Two Cheers for Anarchism.
far more complex than the constructivists ever acknowledged. Society contains many—and many very different—things, persons, groups, preferences and projects. The relationships between these entities are impossible to map and their interactions have numerous unintended consequences. There are positive as well as negative externalities, and transaction costs and information asymmetries often lead to counter-intuitive outcomes. In addition much of the most relevant knowledge is local and personal; it belongs to particular persons and particular places, to the man or the woman “on the spot,” and besides much of the knowledge we need is tacit, non-verbalized, or even unverbalizable.\footnote{Hayek, \textit{The Road to Serfdom}, 83–84; Cf. Scott who approvingly refers to Hayek in Scott, \textit{Seeing Like a State}, 344.}

The problem, critics assert, is not rationalism as much as the centralization of reason and the universalizing ambitions of the modern state.\footnote{Hayek, \textit{The Errors of Constructivism}; Popper, \textit{The Poverty of Historicism}, 64–70.} As individuals we certainly rely on reason when conducting our own lives and much of the time we do so reasonably successfully. The difference is that individual plans are limited in scope and take much more of the relevant data into account, including tacit, hands-on, knowledge and intuitive understandings.\footnote{Rouse, “Practice Theory,” 499–540.} A successful society must consequently acknowledge the plans that individuals make and allow the individuals themselves to flourish. This is the society which makes best use of knowledge but also the society which gives human beings most freedom to pursue their own preferred goals. Society should be organized from the bottom up rather than from the top down.

Hence the idea of self-organization. According to this alternative ontology it is through the independent interaction of individuals that social order is achieved. When leading their lives in their own fashion, people gradually come to adjust to each other. While external authorities such as the state may play a role in providing the framework
within which such self-equilibration takes place, no outsider needs to intervene to bring about particular outcomes. The aggregate pattern will simply be whatever it turns out to be. The best example of such self-organization is the market. In economic markets — or “catallactic systems,” from the Greek for “self-organization” — the enforcement of order is decentralized and unacceptable behavior is automatically punished.\(^\text{16}\) The reason which the market embodies is a collective kind of reason which lies beyond the reasons which individuals themselves provide.\(^\text{17}\) Only the self-organizing system as a whole can gather all the subterranean facts which make up social life and make them relevant for the decisions we make. The fact that the system as a whole goes beyond our cognitive capabilities is exactly the reason why we should avoid interfering with it.

To people of a conservative disposition, the traditions which a society embraces play much the same role as the market.\(^\text{18}\) Traditions too can be understood as repositories of wisdom which far supersede the cognitive abilities of individual minds. Gathered together by many people over many generations, traditions contain tacit knowledge and intuitive understandings concerning the complexities of social life. Adopting these traditions as rules of thumb in conducting our lives, we learn, step-by-step, to adapt ourselves to each other. Taking steps that are too long — dismissing, reconstructing or rationalizing our traditions — is to ignore what it is that keeps social life together. “By a slow but well-sustained progress,” Edmund Burke argued,

> the effects of each step is watched; the good or ill success of the first, gives light to us in the second; and so, from light to light, we are conducted with safety through the whole series. We see, that the parts of the system do not clash. The evils latent in the most promising contrivances are provided for as they arise. One advantage is as little as possible sacrificed to another. We compensate, we reconcile, we balance.\(^\text{19}\)


\(^\text{17}\) Hayek, “Individualism: True and False,” 8.


\(^\text{19}\) Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, 281.
Obviously, if a self-organizing ontology were to become the predominant description of social life there would be little scope for social thought and political action. And over the last couple of decades this is precisely what has happened. Parties and groups on the political right have actively advocated such an ontological shift and parties and groups on the political left — disheartened by the failures of constructivism — have failed to come up with much of an alternative.\textsuperscript{20}

The failure to explain social change

There are many reasons why we may refuse to accept these conclusions. For one thing, the fact that the attempts at wholesale reorganizations of society failed does not mean that partial reforms did not succeed. Obviously, in many cases, they did.\textsuperscript{21} Besides there are many other values than economic efficiency and individual choice to consider — including, inter alia, equality and social justice. Instead of developing these normative arguments, however, let us in what follows confront the self-organizing ontology with its greatest empirical embarrassment: its inability to account for social change.

Continuous change may be the most salient feature of modern society. Modern societies are societies in which change is not \textit{ad hoc} and occasional but systematic and relentless. To be modern is to constantly create — or to believe that one constantly is creating — everything anew; to be modern is to be up-to-date and in touch with the latest developments; at the forefront, or the cutting edge, of that which is best, most current, sophisticated and advanced. “Modernity,” as Octavio Paz explains, “is a polemical tradition

\begin{itemize}
  \item The period after 1950 has been characterized by " the complete atrophy of political imagination" and the staggering "intellectual pauperization of 'socialists' and conservatives alike." Castoriadis, “The Retreat from Autonomy,” 20; Arnason talks about the "retreat from the very idea of 'grand theory,'” and the pursuit of "a more self-limiting and self-relativizing strategy." Arnason, "Invention and Emergence," 101–2.
  \item “As an empirical scientist,” even McCloskey concedes, "I have to admit that social democracy has been a success, at least in countries," she adds, "with traditions of good administration.” McCloskey, \textit{Bourgeois Dignity}, 445.
\end{itemize}
which displaces the tradition of the moment, whatever it happens to be, but an instant
later yields its place to still another tradition which in turn is a momentary manifestation of
modernity.” To be modern is to always be different from oneself. Hence our current
obsession with economic growth. The steady improvement in economic indicators has a
value in itself since it gives the impression that the past is ever more remote and the future
is ever closer. Every day things are getting just a little bit better and every improvement
confirms our faith in the progressive movement of time. In modern society, where the
future is our god, economic change becomes a daily act of worship.

Given the ever-presence of social change we would expect all ontologies of modern
society to be able to account for it. Or differently put, a model of society that cannot
explain social change is ipso facto inferior to one that can. By this test, the catallactic
ontology fails. Self-organizing systems are self-referential and self-reinforcing — markets
are “clearing” and “balancing” — yet as such they are quite unable to account for the
appearance of anything new. An efficient allocation matters, but efficiency is not enough
to explain long-term economic growth. Economics is the science of how things are
“shuffled around,” but shuffling things around can only tell us how they are allocated and
not how the boundaries are determined within which the allocation itself takes place. For
one thing, markets may clear at levels where profits are too low for long-term investments
and research to be possible. As a result self-organization is more likely to lead to
stagnation than to change.

It is only by means of some Deus who descends from a heavenly machina that the
catallactic ontology can be saved from obvious embarrassment. The gods most commonly

23 This is the them of McCloskey, Bourgeois Dignity, esp. 1-39; See further McCloskey, “The Great
   Enrichment”; Weingast, “Exposing the Neoclassical Fallacy”; Ringmar, “Comments on McCloskey
   and Weingast.”
24 Kuttner, Everything For Sale The Virtues and Limits of Markets, 191–224; Lewin, “Hayekian
invoked in relation to economic growth are known as “entrepreneurs.”

Entrepreneurs are the ones who make and break molds, think laterally and out of the box, venture forth, and so on. This, allegedly, is how they effectuate change. Yet we all know from personal experience how difficult it is to change things. Facing the resistance of vested interests, the intransigence of the powerful, the sheer momentum of tradition, ingrained habits, plain stupidity and idleness, it is highly unlikely that change would happen if it only were down to individuals. There is nothing individuals can do when acting on their own, and little they can do when acting together with others. In fact, our contemporary worship of the entrepreneur is more than anything a version of Thomas Carlyle’s hero-worship and Friedrich Nietzsche’s cult of the Übermensch — a figment, that is, of nineteenth-century Romanticism.

The fact that a barren catallactic ontology requires them does not make them real.

Empirical data for long-term economic growth confirms these conclusions. When looking at growth rates for OECD countries, economists have found that only a small proportion can be attributed to changes in inputs of factors of production — capital, labor and natural resources. The remainder — in some cases close to nine tenths of the variation — is left unaccounted for. This means that long-term economic growth cannot be explained in terms of the expansion of markets, the division of labor, the use of new sources of energy, the creation of property rights, new means of transportation — to mention but some of the usual suspects. And while the remainder commonly is taken to represent a measure of “technological innovation,” this leaves the question open regarding

29 McCloskey, Bourgeois Dignity, 125–384.
how technological innovation itself should be explained. Surely social change, including economic growth, is down to a long range of disparate factors, including improvements in education and health, new management techniques and organizational structures, changes in tastes and outlooks, and so on. "Improvements," as already John Stuart Mill explained, must be understood in a wide sense, including not only new industrial inventions, or an extended use of those already known, but improvements in institutions, education, opinions, and human affairs generally, provided they tend, as almost all improvements do, to give new motives or new facilities to production.30

Obviously, these are not factors which classically trained economists are in a position to study.

Differently put, we must stop thinking of change in terms of causes. In the social sciences a "cause" is typically understood in terms of mechanical metaphors.31 Causes are like widgets that push something ahead or like teleological ropes that pull something along. Social explanations proceed by identifying the features of this mechanical apparatus — by describing the causal work carried out by a certain widget or rope. Yet the search for causes will inevitably send us off into an infinite regress. The widgets and ropes will themselves have to be attached to something — that is, to more widgets and ropes — and before we know it we have constructed a mechanical monstrosity from which we can extricate ourselves only by means of some Houdini-like trick — by means of “entrepreneurs,” for example, or “technology.”

This is also, let us suggest, why attempts at “modernization” have failed. Since the new always is replaced by something even newer, modern societies are impossible to conclusively describe. Whenever modernity is equated with a particular something — a technology, policy, gadget or fashion — this may be its latest manifestation but it is never its essence. What is impossible to describe is impossible to explain. The requirements of a

30 Mill, Principles of Political Economy, 192.
31 MacIntyre, “Against the Self-Images of the Age,” 192.
modern society cannot be specified beforehand since we never know where the unfolding of history will take us. The future may indeed be our god, but since the future is unknown so are necessarily the truths we believe in. All we have for now are preliminary theses and best guesses. In the end the object of our worship is at least as remote as ever the gods of previous civilizations. The future, just as Jesus Christ, will never actually come.

The problem of the new

What we need is an alternative ontology; we need another way to think about society, another foundation for political action and social reform. Looking for such an alternative, consider to begin with “the problem of the new”; that is, the problem of how to explain “the continuous creation of unforeseeable novelty which seems to be going on in the universe.” As an issue in metaphysics, this is the problem of how anything new ever could emerge. If our planet is a closed system into which — barring the occasional meteorite — nothing new ever enters, change would seem to be impossible. A new painting, from this point of view, is simply a rearrangement of previously existing pigments and a new poem a rearrangement of previously existing words. *Nihil sub sole novum.* Yet if change is defined in these terms, we are surely demanding too much. Although every work of art certainly draws on preexisting traditions, it would be strange to say that *White Canoe,* for example, existed before Peter Doig painted it in 1991. Surely, although the pigments existed, Doig rearranged them into a new pattern; the substance was there but not the form. Change — at least change as it happens in our sub-solar existence — is a matter of the transformation of forms not the emergence of new substances.

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Modern societies are societies in which the problem of the new is posed with a particular insistence. Modern societies, we said, have no given content, only a given form — the form of the trans-formatio, the form which constantly goes beyond form. This constant “going beyond” is consequently what we need to explain. What interests us, that is, are the conditions under which new forms of whatever kind they may be are more likely to present themselves. Some soils are more productive, more fertile; some conditions are more enabling, more permissive — and modern societies provide a uniquely productive, fertile, enabling and permissive environment for the emergence of the new. Compare the way the ancient Greeks, starting with Hesiod, understood Chaos. Chaos was the original chasm which preceded the creation of the world, yet as such Chaos was not “chaotic” but instead immensely productive; it constituted a field of forces in which new things suddenly just popped up. Chaos was ruled by what the Romans later were to refer to as a vis formandi, a “power of formation,” which eventually gave rise to the entirety of the Cosmos. Made up of a field of forces in which new forms suddenly just pop up, modern society resembles Chaos.

New forms are not created out of the possible but instead out of the potential. The two are not the same. Looking ahead, we only see what is possible, and what possibly could exist are only those things which are derived from existing conditions. Such prognostications are what futurologists engage in and this is why their prognoses so often are mistaken. The White Canoe could never have been derived from the knowledge of pigments which existed prior to 1991; likewise, a thousand monkeys could not have written the collected works of William Shakespeare. Instead the White Canoe and the works of Shakespeare existed potentially, and they existed potentially as soon as they were imagined. The same is true for any number of equally imaginable works of art; in fact, the

36 “Culture in a Democratic Society,” in Castoriadis, The Castoriadis Reader, 342; Casey, The Fate of Place, 7–15.
same is true of unicorns, Kilkenny cats and moon rabbits too which exist potentially, if not here at least in another, potential, world.\textsuperscript{37} What could not possibly exist can potentially exist as imagined by poets, artists and other visionaries. It is the potential, not the possible, which the \textit{vis formandi} relies on for its operations, and this is the fundamental reason why the future is unpredictable. The past is a space, but the future is a horizon, open to the emergence of the new.\textsuperscript{38}

A society which undergoes constant change is a society in which new potentialities constantly are being imagined.\textsuperscript{39} To imagine is to see. It is only once we come to see ourselves that we can imagine what we look like and who we might be. To this end we need a mirror in which our image can be reflected and on which image we can reflect. Such mirrors were for the first time created in Venice in the early Renaissance, and it was now that Europeans for the first time obtained a cheap, accurate, and vertical representation of themselves.\textsuperscript{40} Suddenly we were simultaneously inside ourselves and on the wall in front of us and the distance between the two gave space to the imagination. Or compare the way the Europeans in the Renaissance suddenly discovered new, unexpected, worlds outside of Europe. Seeing themselves in the reflection provided by the \textit{novus mundus} of the Americas, in the classical world of Greece of Rome, or in the infinity of the newly discovered universe, Europeans came to imagine themselves in entirely new ways.\textsuperscript{41}

Yet the \textit{vis formandi} does not only rely on the imagination but it requires action too. We need to act in order to bring the potential into existence. In this respect too the modern world is different from the pre-modern. In modern societies the force of tradition is far weaker and we have more freedom to implement our preferred designs. The modern hero is the man or woman of action, the revolutionary, the iconoclast, the entrepreneur,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Borges, \textit{The Book of Imaginary Beings}.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Koselleck, \textit{Futures Past}, 259–63; On “horizons,” see further Bollnow, \textit{Human Space}.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Miller, \textit{On Reflection}, 34–48; Ringmar, \textit{Why Europe Was First}.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ringmar, \textit{Why Europe Was First}.
\end{itemize}
the member of the avant-garde. Finally the vis formandi requires some form of a conflict resolving device. When the world is imagined and reimagined, when it is acted upon and remade, tensions are bound to arise. Many visions contradict each other and it is not possible for all actors to simultaneously carry out their plans. Modern societies, if they are to remain modern, must be tolerant of this diversity but they must also come up with some means by which the conflicts can be settled or averted. To sum up, the vis formandi of modernity relies on three aspects of change: first, a power of imagination which discovers the potential and proposes new forms; second, a power of action which actualizes the potential; third, a conflict resolving device which allows for diversity and a modicum of social peace.

The mechanics of modernity

Yet it was not through the efforts of individuals that change became a relentless and automatic feature of modern society. As we noted in our brief reference to entrepreneurs above, individuals are quite powerless when acting alone and even quite powerless when acting together with others. What makes modern societies different from pre-modern are instead the institutions they contain. Institutions can swiftly and effortlessly do what none of us can accomplish. This is not to say that institutions necessarily help bring about change. On the contrary, many institutions are highly conservative and backward rather than forward-looking. It is only in societies which we call modern that a particular combination of institutions rather fortuitously came to be assembled which together ended up promoting change. In modern societies the vis formandi has achieved an institutional expression. Or, more succinctly put, in modern societies there are institutionalized ways of imagining potentialities, institutionalized ways of acting on

42 For a dissenting view, see McCloskey, “The Great Enrichment,” 6–18; For a defense, see Weingast, “Exposing the Neoclassical Fallacy,” 189–201.
potentialities, and institutionalized ways of accommodating the new once it is actualized. Since the three aspects of change are institutionalized, change itself is institutionalized.

It is common among contemporary social scientists to regard institutions as incentive structures which reward particular behaviors, or as systems of constitutive rules which assign meaning and distribute power by means of authorizations, obligations and rights.\(^43\) An older tradition, championed by the first generation of institutional economists, took a far broader view, defining an institutions as “a way of thought or action of some prevalence and permanence, which is embedded in the habits of a group or the customs of a people.”\(^44\) This is a definition with unexpected affinities to recent developments in cognitive science. Mental operations, cognitive theorists have come to argue, are not contained by the human skull but extend into the social world and rely heavily on institutional structures — “mental institutions” — which are both widely disseminated and shared.\(^45\) Institutions create and sustain habits, norms and routinized procedures; they provide incentives and outlooks on life; act as repositories of knowledge, prejudices and social memory. And, crucially, they allow specialization and division of labor. Just as modern factories, institutions allow tasks to simultaneously be both narrowly defined and universally coordinated. As a result technical vocabularies, practices and standard operational procedures proliferate although no individual has a grasp of more than an infinitesimally small portion of the processes in which they are involved.

Consider some of the ways in which institutions help us imagine. Reflection is the role of a free press, through which readers are kept abreast of events and brought together into a community, but it is also the task of scientific academies where specialized


\(^{44}\) Hamilton, “Institution.”

knowledge is produced and of universities through which new ideas are disseminated. Art and culture, in their varying guises, fulfill the same imaginative functions, and so do museums, art exhibits and of course the Internet. Parliaments, with their system of committees, are another source of reflection and so are courts of law. Eventually the wealth of images and schemes produced in this way is introduced into a public sphere where the relative merits of each vision is debated and judged. But action is institutionally supported too. In modern societies there are banks and stock markets that help finance projects; there is legal protection for property rights and laws governing contracts and corporations; and there are institutions, like insurance companies, that reduce risks and insecurity. Political action takes place through political parties, demonstrations and petitions, and social action through the creation of trade unions and assorted popular movements. The legal framework guaranteed by the state means that cooperation between individuals is sustainable over time. Finally there are institutional ways in which conflicts are resolved or at least averted. The legal system arbitrates between competing claims but so do economic markets and political institutions such as parliaments where parties, despite their differences, are forced to interact with each other and conclude deals. The system as a whole is in balance although its constituent parts often pull in opposite directions. *E pluribus unum.*

Yet what matters in the end is not how these institutions operate by themselves but instead how they operate together. When properly designed and calibrated, the three

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46 On science in this context, see Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, pt. 2; On universities, see Schleiermacher, *Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense*, 2–3.
49 On the mechanical origins of the idea of self-equilibration, see Mayr, *Authority, Liberty and Automatic Machinery*; On party-systems from this perspective, see Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System*.
50 Cf. what Castoriadis refers to as “magmas.” Castoriadis, “The Logic of M magmas and the Question of Autonomy”; See further Arnason, “Theorising History and Questioning Reason,”
sets of institutions lock on to each other and start working together much like the cogwheels in a machine. The result is a modern society in which change is not ad hoc but automatic; not occasional but permanent; where change just happens without people thinking or worrying much about it and without anyone consciously trying to bring it about. The institutions of modern society constitute a piece of social machinery that constantly churns out new and unexpected products. And most disconcertingly of all, although the machine is man-made, we are neither its designers nor its masters and for that reason change cannot be predicted, stopped or properly controlled. Modern society is a perpetuum mobile from whose constantly changing output we both benefit and suffer.

A politics of the potential

Traditional social ontologies leave us with a poor choice. Constructivism focuses on collective rationality and top-down solutions; metaphors of self-organization focus on individual rationality and bottom-up solutions. Either central planners are doing everything for us or we are forced to do everything for ourselves. The self-confident optimism of the constructivist ontology is appealing to be sure yet it leads to unintended, and occasionally disastrous, consequences; meanwhile the catallactic ontology leaves us free, at best, only within the narrow confines of our individual lives. The alternative solution, briefly prolegomenized here, replaces these ontologies with an ontology of self-actualization or what we could call a “politics of the potential.” The problem with modern society, this alternative allows us to say, is that it is not modern enough. What we need is a newer, more radical, modernity. Rather than spending our time fighting for a better future, we should let the future, whatever it brings, take care of itself. Instead we should

make sure that the kinds of institutions are in place which can make changes, whatever they are, more probable. Forgetting about Cosmos we should stand up for Chaos.

In order for this to happen we need to maximize the reach and power of the vis formandi and defend the kind of fertile, permissive, institutional environment in which it thrives. This means that our societies must become more imaginative, more supportive of action and more accepting of diversity and contradictions. Attaining this goal is a daunting political task in itself and it has far-reaching, and surprisingly radical, implications. It means, for example, that we must defend and improve institutions which help us imagine — news media and the Internet, universities and academies, artistic and cultural institutions. A newer, more modern, modernity would force us all to become more imaginative and spread reflective opportunities more widely. It would also make it far easier to act. Widening differences in income and standards of living mean that opportunities for action are distributed increasingly unevenly and that large segments of the population are marginalized and disempowered. Hopelessness spreads, and so do the passive/aggressive impulses of populist politics. A newer, more radical, modernity would make everyone into a businessman, a revolutionary or a member of the avant-garde.

Likewise, modern societies are clearly far less diverse than they could, and often pretend, to be. Everywhere there is an official public culture dominated by a small and homogeneous set of ideas, values and aspirations, and few genuinely alternative voices are actually expressed. Real dissent is ridiculed or repressed. Meanwhile, the idea of a public sphere is quickly eroding. We need to reestablish a public space in which ideas can clash and where we are forced to listen to minority opinions and to alternatives to our own firmly held views. So far the Internet and social media are part of the problem, not a part of a solution.
This was only a short version of a political agenda which should be made much longer; it is a new radicalism which can be made more radical still. A modern society, according to a politics of the potential, is a project which is yet to be achieved. This is the only kind of radical politics possible in a modern society. It is also the only kind of radical politics we need.

Bibliography


