

Europe and the Invention of Modernity

In the search for the identity of Europe, all too often there is a tendency to look for common origins or for elements of a shared heritage. This doctoral program in history wants to remove such preconceptions and to focus instead on the analysis of the processes that made Europe the first laboratory of modernity, and the processes that led to this phenomenon. This is the twin conceptual core of our new doctoral programme. Thus, we take our distance from traditional inquiries of Europe's identity which usually involve a search for common origins or for elements of a shared heritage. At the core of the programme of our proposed advanced study is the elaboration, from a historical perspective, of the original traits of European modernity, and of the process by which Europe was defined by reference both to the concept of and to the processes entailed in modernity.

Definitions of modernity are legion. For our purposes we think of modernity as a collection of experiences. These crucial experiences are not inscribed within a unitary time frame, as it has been suggested at length through the traditional definition of an "early modern period", which would run from the age of the discoveries to the age of the revolutions. Rather it should be understood as a collection of experiences, some of which (for instance, the reestablishment of Roman law as the foundation for the construction of the State) date back to the Middle Ages, while others last in the long run and are still evolving today. It is important, then, not to be restricted by one simple chronological sequence. At the core of the programme of advanced study that we intend to offer to young researchers is the elaboration, from a historical perspective, of the original traits of modernity in Europe and how Europe was defined through modernity.

The notion of modernity is of course relative and outlines a contradictory process. Actually it is an entangled bundle of different trends and achievements. European societies have made various attempts to define what distinguished them from the societies that preceded them: Humanism and the disputes between Ancients and Moderns are the initial phases of this self-representation. Above all, Europe invented the first civilization which had a dynamic conception of itself and conceived its history as a permanent "revolution". In the course of time, this change underwent phases of rapid acceleration – what, in a technical sense, we now call "revolutions" – but also constitutes the fundamental characteristic of modernity in everyday life.

Besides the fragmented temporality already referred to, modernity as "invented" also involves important spatial aspects. These have to do, in the first place, with the cleavages recorded in the symbolic geography of the European continent. While modernity is conventionally recognized as the business of the "progressive core", in

fact it is impossible to contemplate without the “less happy” regions, not only because these served as a referential “internal other”, but also because the confrontation of the reality of backwardness in these latter regions frequently resulted in highly original conceptualizations of modernity, in which they thus became embraced. In this sense it is fully legitimate to use the notion in the plural and discuss “modernities”. Next, in any appreciation of the idea of modernity the competitive and emulative character of the European cultural and political space has to be taken into account as a feature which further adds to the multiplicity of the notion even when its strictly intra-European aspects are considered. Finally, and in the very same fashion, the claim to modernity also shaped Europe’s complex relations with the rest of the world, through its relations of domination, of course, but also through relations of reciprocity. In that sense, the European identity has also been moulded by the view non-Europeans had of it, something that we are now undoubtedly better able to assess.

Therefore, the invention of the European modernity should be understood not as a linear, continuous and cumulative process. To the contrary, the concept and the practices of modernity have triggered contradictions, and profound tensions. In fact, modernity itself lies at the origin of the profound differentiations inscribed in the core of the common, European space, as we are constantly reminded by current political, economic, social and cultural affairs. Modernity and its contradictions concern our history, indeed our most contemporary history.

Perhaps at the core of this history of Europe’s modernity is the fact that Europe invented the first civilization with a dynamic conception of itself and conceived its history as a continuous “revolution”. Over time, European societies made numerous attempts to define the traits that distinguished them from societies that preceded them. Humanism and the disputes between Ancients and Moderns signal the initial phases of this self-representation and this consciousness that change defined European culture. In the course of time, change underwent phases of rapid acceleration – what, subsequent observers refer to as “revolutions.” To this day, the self awareness of change and the self conscious distancing from the past constitute fundamental characteristics of modernity in everyday life.

This claim to modernity also shaped Europe’s complex relations, of reciprocity and domination, with the rest of the world. In more than a few respects, European identity has also been moulded by the view non-Europeans had of it, a fact about which we are much more sensitive today than we were in the past.

The preceding issues –the differential registers of time and place in which Europe’s modernity was inscribed over time; the self conscious awareness of change as a dominant characteristic of European identity; the consequent tension and dialogue with the past, which represents a steady refrain in the history of Europe; the problematical relations at once of power and of reciprocity between Europe and much of the rest of the world—suggest a variety of approaches and perspectives to the European past. Yet, the issues inherent in these approaches can be organized around one over arching theme: How, and in what terms was modernity constructed and

imagined over the past many centuries? How did Europeans define that particularity? And how has Europe positioned itself –in the realm of thought and in that of the relationships of force and of material exchanges—with regard to the world’s other cultures?

We expect the young researchers who will enrol in this program to acquire a better understanding of the world in which they live and work. From a scholarly point of view, we are eager to confront different national historiographical traditions so as to make a free, critical view on our history possible through an open process of dialogue and exchange.

Topics

For the first two years of the program, four topics have been selected as to offer specific approaches to the making of the European Modernity. Each of them will be treated within a 6 weeks teaching program combining lectures by the staff members and guest speakers, reading seminars and discussions.

1. Ancients and Moderns

Since the end of the Middle Ages, the opposition between Ancients and Moderns has been a recurrent feature of the European identity, with powerful effects on the shaping of this identity. For four centuries, Europe has identified itself with modernity. Such an opposition is obviously relative. It has operated in many different ways over time, quite often in a polemical way. The very notion of Renaissance is associated with a view which, across the 15th and 16th centuries, saw the Middle Ages as an empty, worthless period of history, an obstacle between the Moderns and those who were thought to be the true protagonists, the ancient Greeks and Romans. Three centuries later, the French Revolution worked along the same lines as it decided to open new historical times (and a new future), inventing the notion of the “Old Regime” as an encompassing label for everything which had preceded and should now be removed. More peacefully, our lasting conceptions of cultural life have been and still are structured along the tension between tradition and avant-gardes. These are only a few major examples of a larger process: Europeans have repeatedly used their own historical experience to promote their values, playing on different time scales and references. They acted in this way in Europe and, following the discovery of a larger world, they did so with other societies and cultures outside Europe. European identity is not therefore separable either from a specific conception of historical time and from a representation of possible futures.

2. European expansion and the origins of modernity

The expansion of Europe from the 15th century onwards has highlighted, emphasized and crystallized certain aspects that were to be conceived as specifically European. From this moment on, the phenomenon of Europeanization can be described in terms of contacts with nearby or distant societies (including ones existing within the geographic boundaries of Europe) and the repercussions of these encounters on European societies. The purpose of this cycle is to connect internal processes of Europeanization and external trends and developments. The colonial experience helps to clarify the principal phenomena of European history, in particular the forms of politicization of the European societies, described by terms such as the “process of civilization”, “social disciplining” and “biopolitics”. This perspective is colonial in two respects: in relation to external expansion and in relation to internal processes of cultural imposition.

3. The modern State and the process of the autonomy of politics

The centrality of the State in history and in European political thinking is a classic theme that has never ceased to interest political thinkers. This issue has been significantly enriched in recent decades, which have been marked by the process of European unification. A new generation of historians and social scientists have stressed the essentially experimental, cumulative and negotiated nature of the construction of European statehood by investigating the different and variable contexts (political, religious, social, economic) in which the modern State has established itself (without ever fully becoming the monolithic and bureaucratic Leviathan it has sometimes been portrayed to be) as the fundamental structure of political life, emancipated from previous forms of social organization and lying within a coherent framework of development.

The distinctive feature of this seminar cycle, in keeping with the general framework of the project, is to break with traditional academic schema, removing the sterile chronological barrier between medieval and modern history and focusing on the core topic of the genesis of the modern State with scholars from a range of disciplines: historians, philosophers, jurists, historians of science and techniques, historians of economics.

The aim of this cycle of seminars is to throw light on the compromises and dialectics whereby the autonomy of politics has been progressively constructed through the organization of the judicial system, the formation of the administrative and fiscal State, the regulation of violence, the waging of war and the rise of diplomacy within the system of European States. Starting from these multiple issues, the researchers are invited to reflect upon the current crisis of statehood in the process of globalization and the formation of the new European political framework.

4. Empire, science and the control of nature

The control of nature, based on new instruments of knowledge, gradually took shape between the 16th and the 19th centuries. Although originating in good measure from the cultivation of knowledge as a set of social and cultural practices which did not have this as its primary aim, it did generate a scientific model that was an essential element in European modernity. There are various reasons for this. In the first place, the development of science and technology was inseparable from the emergence of academic production and scientific networks, which grew on a continental and worldwide scale: the universities, the developing of a scientific milieu and networks and the whole array of institutions that contributed to the shaping of a learned sociability and to a model of critical knowledge. Second, such a development of science and technology reinforced the power of the European states and paved the way for an ideology of progress that promoted further changes. Finally, this scientific model assured the pre-eminence of Europe in the age of imperialisms: by setting European parameters as the dominant frames of reference, this model has imposed its own terms upon the dialogue with non-European cultures and knowledge systems, which were thus compelled to enter with it into an asymmetric (albeit reciprocal) relationship, and their own independent development became deflected. These worlds, long ignored by academic study, have now become a focus of attention. The aim of this seminar is to show the complexity of the shaping of European modernity, exploring the threads of this history.

Teaching and research, research as teaching

One of the aims of this program is to make it possible for selected doctoral students to receive an overview of the most recent developments of research in the field which would at the same time match their needs. Three basic requirements intend to answer such needs: a close supervision by experienced mentors; an ample space dedicated to personal research; sessions of collective discussion around a research proposal, a text, etc. Teaching should therefore be closely linked to research with a deliberate stress on research in the making.

As examples of such concerns, the didactic agenda of the first two topics corresponding to the first teaching year is provided with more details hereafter.