Crisis and contingency: Two categories of the discourse of classical modernity

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Abstract
The text reconstructs central theoretical positions in the discourse of modernity in the Weimar Republic in the double semantic context of crisis and contingency. On the one hand, these categories ground the dialectic of destruction and construction, which provides hegemonial evidence for the political and aesthetic concepts of totality in classical modernity. On the other hand, these categories also ground the openness of a thinking in possibilities, which remained marginal in the Weimar Republic but has become dominant in the postmodern critique of modernity.

Keywords
classical modernity, contingency, crisis, postmodernism, state of emergency, Weimar Republic

I

'Reality', Hans Blumenberg observes, is 'what seems the most self-evident and trivial to an epoch, not worth the effort of expressing, consequently that which scarcely ever reaches the level of reflective formulation' (Blumenberg 1964: 10). By the 1920s at the latest, however, reality had completely lost its self-evidence in Europe, had become the problematic object of inescapable reflection and for contemporaries in Gottfried Benn's words 'Europe's demonic concept'. 'Reality', he wrote in 1933, 'no longer exists, at best its grimace.' Only those ages that possessed certainty, whether religious or scientific, could be called happy. The last remnants of religious and scientific belief were now

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dissolving into relations and functions; mad, rootless utopias: nature and history were disappearing into the autocatalytic process of society's utopian rationalizations. 'That was from 1920 to 1925, that was the doomed world, that was functionalism, ripe for the storm that came' (Benn 1989: 266).

Benn's description of the early 1920s is coloured by Expressionistic pathos, which he pushed to the limit in his poetry and essays and to which he gave a nihilistic turn in relation to culture and politics. But the dramatic diagnosis of the total disintegration of reality and of the longing for a new reality was not confined to the Expressionists, the self-stylized avant-garde of a new world, and from the beginning was not simply the concern of conservative intellectuals. However, what was at stake was not just a historical but an ontological situation, in which, in the words of Siegfried Kracauer in 1922, the world is split between a meaningless reality and the subject, who is left as the sole bearer of intellect amidst the chaos. Kracauer also dramatizes like Benn the contemporary situation of the individual confronted by a reality bereft of meaning (Kracauer 1974: 13ff.).

It is clear that Kracauer is positing an emphatic concept of reality as meaningful. The fact that he interprets not only the contemporary situation following the collapse of the 19th-century bourgeois world but the whole modern period as an age of 'transcendental homelessness', to employ Lukács's famous formulation of 1920 in *Theory of the Novel* (Lukács 1971: 32), indicates that Kracauer was not interested in prosaic reality of any kind but in the desire to escape from the empty sphere of pure thought into the sphere of a reality, crowned by a highest transcendent meaning. Like many others Kracauer was in search of new ways out of the 'disenchanted world' that Max Weber saw as the irreversible outcome of the whole tradition of Western intellectualization and rationalization, against which Benn revolted in 1933 (Weber 1995: 18ff.).

These diagnoses of a reality deprived of meaning and substance stood in a long cultural-pessimistic tradition of the German critique of modernity, reinforced by the traumatic experience of the First World War. The golden age of security and assurance, as the 19th century now retrospectively appeared, had disappeared for good, revealing the illusory nature of that century (Zweig 1970: 14ff.). Moreover, the outcome of the war had demonstrated that the unimaginable had occurred and that nothing could be excluded. What had happened between 1914 and 1918 not only rendered all previous experience worthless, it placed the very possibility of experience in question. Benjamin expressed it perhaps most tellingly in 1936:

> Experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into the unfathomable. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world, but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes, which were never thought possible. With the World War a process began to become apparent, which has not halted since then. (Benjamin 1969: 84)

Now that the unimaginable had become catastrophic reality, the postwar horizon of possibilities was perceived by contemporaries as lacking all limits. However, without any limit the field of possible experience had lost all coherence and devalued all previous criteria of coherence. The advent of the new was so exceptional that it defied meaningful ordering. This unparalleled sense of shock that suspended the possibility of experience

was the 'state of emergency', defined by Carl Schmitt in 1922 as the suspension of the whole existing order. It was understood by him as the fundamental political problem of the early modern period, namely the arbitrary postulation of order, which he then transposed to the political-metaphysical situation of the early 20th century (Schmitt 1985: 19ff.).

This dramatic perception of reality, which was summed up in the topos of 'chaos', wasn't confined to the immediate postwar years: the crisis continued. In 1927 Klaus Mann expressed the experience of his generation that everything is possible: 'Will we have the monarchy and an emperor next week? We won't be in the slightest surprised. Will we have a communist soviet state with terror and the red flag the day after tomorrow? We are prepared for everything' (Mann 1927: 13). And Hugo von Hofmannsthal registered at the same time as Klaus Mann a directionless searching and striving but with very different political options in mind (Hofmannsthal 1966: 401).

II

Whatever the specific discursive context and the theoretical status of these witnesses, they all define or describe a crisis situation – that is, an open undetermined situation that makes it impossible to derive future possibilities from present realities. Beyond the cultural dramatizations, which made the concept of crisis inherently problematic, 'crisis' since the middle of the 18th century at the latest denotes the political-social semantics of an open situation of social transition, diametrically opposed to a situation oriented to tradition. This transitional situation has become permanent in modernity, because individual and collective expectations have been liberated from previous experience – to such an extent that expectations, as Reinhart Koselleck has shown, could be opposed to experience and actually have been since the French Revolution (Koselleck 1979: 349–75). This permanent state of transition can be grasped teleologically as progress, but seen structurally it is nothing but the transition from one functional order to another, as Paul Valéry put it more soberly (Valéry 1957: 1041).

In the context of the historical semantics of the concept of culture, this is precisely the situation of a modern society in the systematic sense of the term. A society is modern when it is no longer primarily determined by tradition or by a given foreseeable future. The social character of modernity consists in the progressive emancipation of individuals from communal bonds. Placed together, autonomous individuals and their life projects relativize each other, resulting in a simultaneity of heterogeneous worlds, which demands a continuous conscious construction of subjective and social coherence as the basis of life and action. Since all these constructions are not substantive but relative, realities are contextually determined and all order is contingent, since it can always be other. Metaphysically speaking, a modern society is completely immanent, no longer the historical site of transcendent meaning but the functional aggregate of plural realities and temporary relations. Its phenomenological expression is given by the metropolis and its urban life forms.

Historically, modernity in this sense only became an all-embracing and inescapable reality in Germany in the Berlin of the Weimar Republic (Makropoulos 2004). And it was experienced by contemporaries as an absolutely open and hence extremely crisis-laden

situation. But this, we may say, was only the surface impression of the historical-metaphysical situation of 'classical modernity', because experience is not prior to interpretation, that is, without interpretation the sheer factuality of events cannot be transformed into experience. Interpretation in turn presupposes expectations, which depend on a certain structuring of reality. Reality – despite the positivists – is a historically changing affair.

If we historicize the concept of reality in Blumenberg's sense, classical modernity possesses neither the self-evidence of antiquity nor the 'guaranteed reality' of the Middle Ages and its secular continuation in the concepts of universal reason and sovereignty. Modernity demanded to be understood as a specifically modern, immanent reality, whose correlate was the constructive capacity of autonomous subjects and the productivist self-understanding of the age. And it was the catastrophic end of the bourgeois world in the First World War that first revealed modernity in all its unknown possibilities (Blumenberg 1964). Henceforth reality was something to be constructed.

The problematic nature of a modern reality that defied self-evident expectations was, however, not solely the result of autocatalytic processes of constructivism; nor was it just the product of the coexistence of heterogeneous realities. It was rather the outcome of the conceptual expectations of a new reality that still partook of the structure of the old homogeneous reality. And such expectations led almost automatically to the perception of a situation of unfathomable contingency and thus to the problematization of the semantics of contingency. The contingent is what could be other because it has no necessary ground of existence. This general definition already indicates that the contingent is something utterly ambivalent that can be realized in two modalities. The contingent belongs, on the one hand, to the realm of chance and the incalculable. The contingent, on the other hand, is everything that can be manipulated, that can be the object of arbitrary constructions, which likewise could be other. This action-theoretical dimension became in classical modernity a problem with serious consequences since, strictly speaking, action lies in deciding between different possibilities. This, of course, poses the question of the criteria governing decisions. In familiar, homogeneous reality, this criterion is experience within a defined horizon of possibilities, as opposed to the open, unbounded horizon of possibilities of contingent reality. In a situation of plural realities, in which the unimaginable occurs, reality becomes traumatic and all previous experience is rendered worthless, the criteria of action are suspended. The crisis situation appears in terms of an extreme deficit and the problem of contingency and its strategic disposition becomes central to the critique of modernity in the discourse of classical modernity.

III

It was characteristic for the discourse of classical modernity that contingency in relation to the present was radicalized into absolute, ontological contingency. Not only could what one does be other, but so too could the world itself. 'Contingent world and problematic individual are mutually determining realities' was Lukács's striking formulation of the classical modern self-understanding. Moreover, he applied this diagnosis not only to the early 20th century but to the whole modern period. The 1920s in this perspective did not signify the crisis of modernity, rather modernity was the completion of the historical crisis that had erupted in the modern period. The longing for the absolute as

opposed to the contingent thus formed the one side of the discourse of classical modernity. The other side was given by the free disposition over contingent realities, which opened up the possibilities of free construction – a freedom integral not only to the fantasies of the arbitrary shaping of reality but equally to the totalizing tendencies of the radical political, social, philosophical, and especially aesthetic options that competed with each other in the 1920s. The diagnosis of *tabula rasa* as the antithesis of a desired homogeneous reality lent an irresistible plausibility to decisionistic conceptions of action pregnant with the will to the total reshaping of reality. Hence the heated pathos surrounding the theme of decision in the classical modern scenario.

Precisely because nothing was now determined, experiments could be and were tried. Nevertheless, it is characteristic and remarkable that the avant-gardes of these years were in no way committed to the new and unknown. They regarded the openness of situation as a transitional state that must and could be overcome, if necessary – in light of the perception of the present as a 'state of emergency' – by force. The ambivalence, as it was later seen, between the search for the new and the simultaneous will to totalization was not in fact so contradictory. For common to all political positions was the desire to bring the contingency of self and world to an end. And that is the reason why constructivist freedom was tied from the beginning to the goal of the complete overcoming of contingency.

The constellation underlying this 20th-century goal was expressed most clearly by Lukács. The modern period was defined by a fundamental contradiction. It was an 'epoch, for which the extensive totality of life was no longer evidently given, for which the immanence of life's meaning had become a problem and yet it possesses the longing (*Gesinnung*) for totality' (Lukács 1971: 30). This longing for totality informed not only the inner rationality of aesthetic projects – 'created totalities' – but also sociophilosophical projects and their Marxist actualizations, in which Lukács played a major role. Against Weber's apparent affirmation of the ongoing processes of specialization, intellectualization and disenchantment, Lukács upheld the 'standpoint of totality' (Lukács 1971: 272), for which Benn's term was 'indubitable reality', Kracauer's 'fulfilled space crowned by a higher transcendent meaning'; Benjamin would later call the spontaneous presence of meaning 'aura', which had found its last materialization in the bourgeois work of art (Benjamin 1969). In 1917 Benjamin had called for the founding of a new 'concrete totality of experience', that is, 'religion' (Benjamin 1977: 170). By 1936, however, he had come to see the task of the new art of film in the context of his media theory as the habituating of the human perceptual apparatus to modern technical-artificial realities, thereby demonstrating the ontological foundation, the 'nature' of the new realities.

This helps us to understand the various avant-garde attempts to attain to the elementary dimensions of phenomena – especially in painting and architecture, which led the way in reducing the elements of construction to basic geometric forms. Piet Mondrian's models of universal harmony were media of a 'new reality'; Walter Gropius derived the idea of the Bauhaus from the 'idea of a new unity of the world', and Le Corbusier saw the architect as the yardstick of an order attuned to the order of the world. This will to order underpinned the pathos-laden topos of unification, of the fusion of art and life, which electrified the avant-gardes of classical modernity and was directed to an aesthetic

organization of life (Makropoulos 2004: 78ff.). Such visions of self-created totality only became truly explosive, however, in the field of political theory, where Schmitt undertook his own theoretical reconceptualization of the 'law of the avant-garde' and its dialectic of destruction and construction.

Schmitt conceived the problem in legal terms as one of order and derived from the critical openness of the situation the possibility and necessity of a sovereign grounding of order in decision – but not solely as a theoretical question of right since his metaphysics of decision laid claim to being a theory of action with its later barbaric political consequences. For in the state of emergency all norms are 'annihilated'. The ab-normal situation of chaos must be replaced by an act of decision, a sovereign 'political act' that supersedes the legal order. The goal of such a political act was the creation of 'form in a substantive sense' (Schmitt 1985: 36). Schmitt was not the only one to raise the question of form. Lukács had already written in 1911 in quasi-legal terms that 'form is the highest judge of life' (Lukács 1971: 248). Hofmannsthal anticipated in 1927 a 'conservative revolution', whose essence would be 'form', namely 'a new German reality in which the whole nation could participate' (Hofmannsthal 1966: 409, 413). But it was Schmitt who defined the problem in terms of decision. Order must be established. Its condition, however, was the complete destruction of the previous order, the creation of a *tabula rasa* that cleared the space for construction. Its precondition in turn revealed the other face of the ambivalence of sovereignty: the unlimited authority to suspend the whole existing order through proclamation of the state of emergency.

IV

Schmitt's legal precondition for 'form in a substantive sense' and its political implications signified for Benjamin the general model of modern aesthetic subjectivity and the conceptual basis for its demiurgic variant, central to the avant-gardes of classical modernism. At the heart of Benjamin's sociology of modern art in the 1920s and 1930s was the correspondence between the figure of the modern artist, understood as constructivist allegorist, and the idea of the sovereign subject, who is capable of absorbing and compensating for the destruction of reality. And this correspondence was in turn the source of his critique of totalization as the product of sovereign aesthetic or political acts. If the construction of totality is grounded in pure subjectivity then it is itself purely contingent: the arbitrary product of the subject (Makropoulos 1989: 28ff.). This was not only a fundamental critique of Schmitt's decisionism and a decided rejection of all modern concepts of aesthetic subjectivity together with their political extrapolations that had accorded the artist since early Romanticism the privilege of legislative authority. Beyond that, it called the whole modern, enlightenment conception of autonomous subjectivity radically into question, since it intensifies instead of reducing contingency. For this reason Benjamin placed his hopes neither in totalizing constructions nor in avant-gardism but in the capacity of the new art of film to accept the new and habituate human perception to the new technical realities of modernity.

In *The Man without Qualities*, Robert Musil presents a hero who no longer longs for security in a narrative order that suggests necessity, a hero who has developed a specific 'sense of possibility', who is not afraid of reality and treats it as both task and invention.

The sense of possibility could be defined as recognizing that what is could just as well be other, and therefore not to take what is given more seriously than what is not. This indifference was not simply a private quirk of Musil's fictional hero, it had a quasi-objective dimension that Musil saw as characterizing the historical situation against the background of the First World War:

> It is the acute feeling of chance in everything that happened. It would be pushing faith in historical necessity too far if we sought to perceive a unified meaning in everything we have experienced. In retrospect it is easy to see for example necessity at work in the failure of German diplomacy or of military strategy; everybody knows that it could just as well have been different and that the outcome often hung in the balance. It almost looks as though the events were not necessary but only permitted the retrospective projection of necessity. (Musil 1978a: 1077)

Musil turned sharply against all attempts to derive historical and social realities from a single source or causal complex. Musil deplored the absence of functional thinking in relation to social and cultural phenomena, precisely, that is, what the dominant crisis thinking of the time regarded as the problem to be overcome – thus Benn spoke of the dissolution of nature and the dissolution of history whereby the 'old realities of space and time' had become mere functions of formulas, health and sickness mere functions of consciousness, and finally even the most concrete powers such as state and society could no longer be grasped as substance. Quite the contrary for Musil, who also registered 'chaos' but didn't place his faith in historical-philosophical concepts or new ontological bonds. His starting point was the principle of insufficient reason and he argued the reality must be viewed as a total laboratory, in which the best ways to be human were being tested and reinvented. Such an attitude of course demanded a more flexible ethics: 'Every ethical event', Musil wrote in relation to his description of the consequences of the World War, has 'different sides; on the one hand it is good, on the other bad, from a third position it is not at all clear whether it is good or bad. Goodness doesn't appear as a constant but as a variable function' (Musil 1978b: 1073).

V

Musil wasn't the only one to register the irreducible perspectivism of historical processes along with their reality-determining interpretations. In 1929 Karl Mannheim elaborated a sociology of knowledge that correlated the perspectivism of social realities with the social 'relationality' of discourses, that is, the institutional determination of thought, which could well correspond to the counter-factual expectations of totality of the period (Mannheim 1960: 69). It was not for Mannheim, however, a question of a total form of modern society in a substantive sense but of society as a functional totality, composed of a plurality of contradictory world views that transformed the intellectual crisis into a situation of irreconcilable styles of thought, each of which sought to demolish the social and intellectual existence of its opponents. Mannheim's totality is thus 'the totality of the historical complex in which we can see the role, significance and meaning of each component element in the co-existing phenomena' (Mannheim 1960: 83). Rather than the creation of a homogeneous totality in a substantive sense, it involved the construction

of a homogeneous medium, in which the opposing forces could be measured. The crisis of thought was not for Mannheim the crisis of one position but rather the crisis of a world that has reached a certain level of intellectual complexity. The fact that we can see the problems of being and thought ever more clearly is a sign not of impoverishment but of infinite enrichment.

In a similar fashion Helmut Plessner embraced in his philosophical anthropology the idea of pluralism and rejected the historical-philosophical conceptions of decline with their theoretical mourning over the loss of meaning and an assured reality. Plessner accepted the 'constitutive', as opposed to the 'transcendental homelessness' of humans, which he derived from 'the eccentricity of their life form, their existence in the Nowhere' (Plessner 1981: 383, 424). Plessner's anthropology was thus categorically opposed not only to all the evocations of 'home' but also to the entire repertoire of positive expectations in the discourse of classical modernity: 'Only religion can offer ultimate bonds and integration, the place of life and death, security, reconciliation with fate, interpretation of reality and home.' 'Whoever wishes to find the way home and security must sacrifice the self to faith. Whoever is committed to intellect cannot return' (Plessner 1981: 419).

VI

Even though this spectrum of intellectual positions is selective, we can draw some conclusions from the semantics of contingency. The unquestioned manner in which ontological bonds and positive qualities in a homogeneous reality were presupposed focused the salient tendencies in the discourse of classical modernity – and the perception of the period – on a coupling of problems and solutions that from the beginning collided with modernity. Where reality is experienced as a waste land, heterogeneity interpreted as lost unity, pluralism as a levelling, devaluing relativity destructive of all qualities, and the situation comprehended as 'transcendental homelessness' in a 'contingent world', it is then inescapably the case that a meaningful order of reality and a definitive finality to history is being posited. The goal is to cancel contingency or to marginalize it to the extent that it becomes negligible. Such a horizon embraces not only historical-philosophical cultural criticism and avant-garde constructions of a new, unified aesthetic or political reality but equally radical extrapolations of the longing for homogeneity into totalitarian realizations of a trans-historical 'substantive' foundation of politics and the state as a legal form as was violently established in 1933 in Germany. But 'nowhere', Plessner wrote in 1921, 'except in absolute autocracies, is the state substantive. In modern conceptions it consists essentially of services' (Plessner 2001: 55).

The different positions in the dominant discourse of classical modernity converged on the strategy of cancelling contingency. In other words: there were underlying congruities between the different political, social, philosophical and aesthetic conceptions that structurally shaped the coupling of problems and solutions – outcomes that do not result from ideological radicalization but are inherent in the deep structure of these conceptions. That is why the different contents and the politically different ideas in the dominant discourse of classical modernity are actually interchangeable as regards the criteria for problems, expectations regarding reality and the structure of their solutions. The theoretically decisive dichotomy in the discourse of the 1920s is not that between

'right' and 'left' or 'conservative' and 'progressive' but that between positions and conceptions that are discursively committed to cancelling contingency and those that aim for what we may call tolerance of contingency. Tolerance excludes in principle absolute solutions and thereby reinforces the systematic centrality of the problem of contingency for classical modernity. This is the other side of classical modernity that was being theoretically marginalized right up to the 'postmodern' critique of the counter-factual longing for totality. It is this other side that completes the discursive field of tensions of the 1920s at the same time as it maintains the focus on the problem of contingency at the strategic core of classical modernity. Irreducibly bound up with the ambivalent depth structure of the semantics of contingency, classical modernity extends far into the 20th century and only finds its systematic and historical conclusion in the 1980s in the postmodern rejection of the semantics of political-social crisis with the implied necessity of the total shaping of social realities.

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