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Contingency between Plurality and Potentiality

1. The Ambivalence of the Contingent

Hardly any concept expresses the modal structure of modern society as succinctly as the concept of contingency. Defining reality within the horizon of its possibilities and proceeding from the assumption that what is could also be otherwise belongs to the elementary self-evidences of this society. However, the unquestioned nature of this state of affairs obscures the systematic problem inherent in the concept, as it suggests that it is clear wherein the possibility of being otherwise consists. Yet precisely this is not the case. The classical definition, according to which that which is neither necessary nor impossible is contingent, merely determines the relationship between reality and possibility within the horizon of impossibility and necessity. However, it does not explain how this relationship itself is structured, even though what is can possibly be otherwise in multiple respects.

This initially has a conceptual-historical dimension. In the medieval tradition, the ancient category of chance was linked with the category of the possibility of being able to be otherwise and systematized in terms of modal logic. Consequently, the concept of contingency is decidedly ambivalent. Ultimately, neither necessary nor impossible is both the available and manipulable as well as the unavailable and accidental. Contingency therefore designates that open sphere between necessity and impossibility in which not only actions but also accidents are realized. As decisions between multiple possibilities, actions can ultimately only be realized where things can also be otherwise. Yet precisely there, accidents also occur which, unlike actions, are neither based on decisions nor can be justified or attributed to an actor, and are therefore determined as groundless.

2. The Boundedness of the Contingent

Alongside the ambivalence of the concept emerges an ambiguity of the state of affairs, which is of particular relevance for its social-theoretical use. If action, in contrast to behavior, is the decision between multiple possibilities, the question arises as to the criterion guiding this decision. Not only for ancient praxeology was this criterion experience, which corresponded with a consciousness of possibility restricted to the objects of human efficacy. This entailed not only the boundedness of the human sphere of action imposed by

ancient cosmology; what transcended the present and immediate sphere of practice as an ensemble of actions of concrete groups and subjects also eluded human power. Therefore, antiquity possessed neither a political universalism nor a claim to a totality of cognition and shaping. Here, only events were contingent, but not the reality in which these events were executed as actions or occurred as accidents. Accordingly, actions referred solely to empirical objects and intersubjective relations within a finite horizon of possibility. And chance was either good fortune or misfortune—which generally resulted from the unpredictable intersection of various actions.

Within this horizon of possibility, the sphere of action could indeed be extended and broadened, but it could not, for its part, be otherwise because the horizon of possibility was given ontologically. This restriction is important from a structural perspective. For, under these conditions, action fundamentally does not reach beyond the horizon of given possibilities. Contingency thus manifests itself as a plurality of possibilities which, strictly speaking, are merely other realities manifesting themselves in the actions of other actors. The orientation of action toward a concrete plurality of other realities and other actors consequently results in the fundamental and therefore unreflected politicization of the entire relation to the world—politicization not in the ideological or partisan sense of the term, but in its structural sense, in which the horizon of social action fundamentally reaches no further than the sum of the positions of all actors involved therein and the realities represented therein at a given moment. Hence the presentist character of a reality that corresponds to the momentary evidence of positional constellations. While it recognizes plural options, it recognizes no potential options.

3. The Unbounding of the Contingent

The restriction of contingency to the plurality of concrete possibilities has remained a central premise of practical philosophy and political theory to this day. At the same time, this restriction dissolves in the modern era through a consequential transformation of scholastic contingency awareness—which incidentally fully proves that contingency is not an ontological fact, but a pronounced product of reflection. In the wake of the medieval view that the world itself is contingent because God's will alone sustains it, a notion of totality breaks through that structures the problem of contingency in a fundamentally different way. Since then, not only the entities upon which action is realized and the accidental manifests are contingent, but also the reality in which these entities stand. Consequently, the ambivalence of the contingent as a sphere of action and a sphere of chance—that is, the ambivalence

between the available and the unavailable—now acquires a further and very different quality. For the sphere of action now becomes, for its part, available and manipulable. And randomness is radicalized into complete groundlessness. With this, however, contingency is not merely dimensioned differently; it generates a consciousness of possibility that—one way or another—fundamentally points beyond its previous restrictions because it is no longer oriented merely toward the plurality of actual possibilities, but toward the potentiality of future possibilities.

This distinction is essential for any use of the concept of contingency because it represents not merely a terminological clarification, but designates two different modalities of societal world-relations: Plurality contingency refers to a given horizon of possibility, whereas potentiality contingency refers to an available horizon of possibility. Alongside the bounded space of real possibilities there thus steps the boundless horizon of fictional possibilities, in which concrete manipulability becomes abstract constructibility and concrete randomness becomes abstract meaninglessness. This alters not only the orientation of action—as abstract expectations take the place of concrete experiences—but also its structure of purposiveness. Where contingency means plurality, action is essentially transitive. It is directed toward concrete objects and executes itself as a selection among them. Its mode of operation is selection. Where contingency means potentiality, by contrast, action is essentially intransitive. It is directed toward the abstract expansion of the horizon of possibility itself. Its mode of operation is construction—and indeed not only in the sense of the targeted production of new realities, but also in the sense of the open-ended—yet not aimless—opening up and invention of new possibilities.

4. On the Current Function of the Concept of Contingency

The consequences of this distinction extend far beyond conceptual systematics. Corresponding to it are the ways in which freedom, politics, technology, art, progress, or critique are conceived and realized. Where contingency is determined according to the logic of plurality, freedom appears as a choice between given realities, and politics becomes the paradigmatic form of organizing their coexistence. Where contingency is determined according to the logic of potentiality, by contrast, freedom appears as the capacity for opening up and realizing new possibilities in a world whose meaninglessness liberates the constructive faculty from its traditional ties. Not politics, but technology, science, and art then become the paradigmatic forms of a practice that alters the horizon of the feasible itself. Plurality contingency and potentiality contingency therefore designate not simply two variants of the same state of affa-

irs, but two fundamentally different ways of organizing the relationship between reality and possibility. A history of the concept of contingency can therefore also not be reconstructed as a continuous expansion or enhancement of a uniform state of affairs. Rather, it is the history of a categorical difference within the consciousness of possibility itself, which shows that under the concept of contingency very different and partly opposing modal-structural dispositions are subsumed.

Against this background, contemporary contingency semantics also acquires a more precise meaning. When it is declared that contingency is an intrinsic value of complex societies, or when the contingency of particular narratives is substituted for universal meta-narratives, it remains unclear in both cases which contingency is actually meant. In fact, these theoretical positions frequently operate with a concept of contingency that signifies the plurality of simultaneously existing possibilities and defines contingency as selectivity. Thereby, however, the second form of contingency is eclipsed—the form that makes the horizon of possibility itself the object of social practice and which as potentiality became the proper modal structure of modern contingency culture and its contemporary variations. From here, a moment of the classical concept of contingency that continues to exert an effect to this day can also be more precisely defined. If contingency is understood as the plurality of existing possibilities, then freedom is necessarily freedom of choice and contingency correspondingly selectivity. This explains the systematic continuity between ancient praxeology and modern theories, which define contingency either as an operative reduction or as a productive recombination of the fullness of possibilities in complex realities. Both are selections from an existing abundance of possibilities.

5. On the Critical Function of the Concept of Contingency

The critique of modernity has not abandoned the concept of contingency, but has counterposed concrete plurality to abstract potentiality, thereby altering the strategic orientation of the concept. Herein lies the true significance of what has been negotiated under the term postmodernity since the 1970s. The grand narratives of progress, emancipation, or historical reason were discarded because they privileged and totalized potentiality contingency. Critique was thus directed not against the possibility of being otherwise as such, but against that modal-structural disposition which placed the possible within the horizon of limitless expandability, infinite optimizability, and boundless availability while simultaneously absolutizing it in the wake of cosmological and theological world-views. Postmodernity was therefore not a blanket pro-

clamation of contingency against its teleological sublations, but rather the revaluation of plurality contingency over potentiality contingency and its totalitarian exaggerations. Real plurality was to take the place of fictitious potentiality, and contingency now meant no longer that the entirety of reality could become fundamentally different, but that different realities exist simultaneously and relativize one another.

Through this, however, the socio-critical function of contingency also changes. As long as potentiality contingency dominates, it aims at the alteration and transcendence of the given. It derives its standard from fictionally unlocked possibilities, and its ultimate *modus operandi* is revolution. Critique thereby possesses a progress-logical dimension. Where plurality contingency determines the horizon of possibility, by contrast, the future loses its privileged position and the revolutionary transgression of the given loses its critical significance. The critical relativization of one's own reality then occurs through the presence of other realities. It is not the future that criticizes the present, but other presents that criticize one's own. With this, however, the epistemological reference of the humanities and social sciences also shifts. Other cultures take the place of one's own history, the description of contemporary difference takes the place of the reconstruction of historical development, and the question regarding the recognition of existing diversities takes the place of the question regarding the direction of societal transformation. The shift in the epistemological reference of social theory from historiography to ethnology is therefore more than a mere methodological change. Rather, it marks the transition from a potentiality-logical to a plurality-logical modality of world-relation in social theory, which not coincidentally corresponds to the valorization of the empirical against the transcendental. And to the implicit politicization of social theory.

6. Politics and Conceptual Politics

Not least, this shift entails significant political consequences. When potentiality contingency dominates, social practice is directed toward innovation, optimization, self-optimization, and open-ended self-development. Where plurality contingency dominates, the accent lies on recognition, representation, identity, and goal-determined self-realization. Politics is then guided not by the question of what ought to be done, but by the question of who must be recognized. This also allows contemporary identity politics to be more precisely defined. They are neither merely moral movements nor solely the consequences of new social conflicts, but the expression of the dominance of a plurality-logical modal structure under large-scale societal conditions. Their

normative points of reference are not abstract possibilities of becoming otherwise, but concrete realities of being-thus. They demand no further possibilities, but the recognition of existing realities. Precisely for this reason do they possess a transitive character. They are directed toward existing identities, existing communities, and existing cultural holdings. Their point of reference remains the real. Herein lies their ambivalence, however. On the one hand, they form the critical objection against that optimization-logical unbounding which perceives every reality solely from the standpoint of its surpassability and elevates creative destruction to a principle of social organization. On the other hand, they tend to bind the horizon of possibility entirely to present realities.

Perhaps this is the true cultural signature of the present. It is determined neither by the unmitigated rule of potentiality contingency nor by the complete renaissance of plurality contingency. Rather, both modal structures encounter one another directly and by no means without conflict. The struggles over diversity, identity, locality, and belonging, or innovation, progress, mobility, and independence are therefore not merely political disputes. They are not merely struggles over the correct form of life. They are also the expression of two different ways of organizing contingency. The question is therefore not whether modern societies are determined by contingency. Rather, the question is when and under what conditions the one or the other form of indeterminacy organizes the world-relation of a modern society and guides the self-relation of its individuals. And how.

(in: <https://www.michael-makropoulos.de/basis-en.html>)