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The Social Organization of Openness to Possibilities.

An Outline of a Theory of Modernity.

1. Contingency

Something is contingent if it could also be otherwise. The term does not denote indeterminacy in general, but rather the limited indeterminacy in which something is neither necessary nor impossible. As a two-sided possibility, contingency is therefore decidedly ambivalent. After all, both the available—and in principle manipulable—and the unavailable—and utterly contingent—are neither necessary nor impossible. This makes the matter systematically relative to interpretation. Historically, however, its dependence on interpretation becomes absolute, because the history of truth also reveals the necessary as something that is just as changeable as the possible and the impossible. What is considered available or unavailable at a given time, in a given culture, and in a given society—and why—signals the insurmountable horizon of possibility that characterizes them and distinguishes them unmistakably from other times, other cultures, and other societies. That is why every era has its own horizon of possibility. And that is why the concept of contingency does not denote an ontological fact that would precede all history, all culture, and all society as a *factum brutum*, but rather a variable modal structure that, as the fundamental relationship between reality and possibility, defines the principled scope for action and behavior in a society.

Against this backdrop, the concept of contingency initially refers to the ambivalent realm of a specific indeterminacy within reality, in which both chance events and actions take place. As a decision among several possibilities, action can ultimately take place only where things could also be different. Action thus presupposes that relative openness of reality which constitutes a distinct sphere of action in the first place. But this is also the circumstance that simultaneously characterizes the contingent. An event is, in fact, accidental precisely when it occurs within this open realm of reality but—unlike decision-generated action, which is justifiable or at least attributable—is deemed to be without cause. However, the accidental only becomes recognizable as something beyond one's control during the course of action, because it unexpectedly influences, distracts, or thwarts it. This points to a temporal difference within the contingent: randomness is a retrospective determination, because it presupposes that the event has already occurred, whereas manipulability is a future-oriented determination that refers to future events.

2. The Ancient Awareness of Possibility

The realm of action, as the realm of genuine alternatives, is at the same time the realm of chance. One could therefore almost elevate the seemingly insignificant semantic difference between mutability and changeability to a categorical distinction, marking a problem of interference that intensifies as the complexity of actions increases, because these actions can always be thwarted by other events. In addition to the problem of interference, however, another problem arises that becomes the primary issue due to the temporal difference between chance and action: If action—unlike behavior—is the decision between several possibilities, then the question arises as to the criterion that guides this decision or justifies it retrospectively. Not only in antiquity but well into the early modern period, this criterion was past experience. It corresponded to an awareness of possibility that clearly distinguished the sphere of human power from that which eluded human power and definitively limited the scope of meaningful actions. This manifested not only the ontological limitation of the human sphere by ancient cosmology—or later by the medieval order of creation—but, particularly in the ancient worldview, what was beyond human control was above all that which transcended the immediate present and the immediate sphere of practice of concrete actors.

The ancient conception of contingency was based on a premise that, from a modern and certainly from a contemporary perspective, is anything but self-evident: only events were contingent, but not domains of events or their horizons of possibility. Accordingly, contingency manifested itself in concrete plurality rather than in abstract potentiality. Action therefore related exclusively to empirical objects and intersubjective relationships that existed within a finite horizon of possibility—and, under this premise, it could reasonably relate only to these. While the sphere of action could be extended and expanded, it could not, in principle, be altered, because the horizon of possibility was ontologically given and therefore could not be the object of human action. For this reason, political and social action was also the core domain of contingency; a universalistic expansion of the sphere of action—which is inscribed in both the project of modernity and the concept of humanity—would likely have seemed just as preposterous to the ancient worldview as an active alteration of the natural conditions of the human species. Consequently, despite all the advances in technical skill and political-social knowledge, the ancient awareness of possibility remained a limited awareness of improvement that did not lead to a comprehensive awareness of change comparable to the modern awareness of progress. Accordingly, contingency was limited to fortunate or unfortunate, but always incalculable, chance.

3. The Modern Awareness of Possibility

This limitation of the horizon of possibility dissolves in the modern era and distinguishes the modern awareness of contingency in principle from that of antiquity, if not from that of the pre-modern era as a whole. Contingent, one might describe this difference, are now not only the realities through which action is realized, but also the reality in which these actions and realities are situated. The plurality of concrete possibilities that remains within the finite space of interrelated actors and their actions is expanded by the potentiality of abstract possibilities that lie within the open horizon of the boundless infinity of the fictional. For contingency—at the latest with the emergence of a project-oriented reason, manifested in the shift of technical constructions from improvements to inventions and of economic endeavors from expansions to the removal of boundaries—also encompasses the sphere of action and the concept of reality. The sphere of action now loses its ontological limitations and binding nature, thereby becoming, in turn, accessible. And reality now unfolds into a multiplicity of contextual realities. Thus, in the modern era, contingency is not only redefined in different terms but also generates an awareness of possibility that points—not merely gradually but in principle—beyond the previously valid limitations of human thought and action, revealing the contours of a culture for which contingency is no longer an incidental but a constitutive fact.

Only now can we speak of a culture of contingency in the strict sense—that is, of an intrinsic relationship to the self and the world in which reality could be different not just in part, but in principle. In the course of the modern era, this led to the sphere subject to human power being increasingly expanded, opening up possibilities in emerging modern societies that had previously been not only untapped or unknown, but completely unimaginable and unthinkable. This is the emphatic side of modern awareness of contingency. On the one hand, it is realized in the shift of technical and aesthetic thought and action from imitation to construction. On the other hand, it manifests itself in that transformation of the conception of the future in which the awareness of contingency has been temporalized and led from the adventist-closed horizon of eschatological teleologies into the futuristic-open horizon of finalizations grounded in the logic of progress. But the situation was experienced not only as a gain in human freedom, but also, from the very beginning, as acute disorientation, bottomless instability, and frightening uncertainty. For although the realm in which things could also be different no longer had a definitive boundary, the necessity of such a boundary continued to be presupposed and sought in holistic designs for a new order of reality. This is the other, problematic side of modern awareness of contingency. Together, however, these

two aspects endow the modern relationship between the self and the world with that characteristic deep structure that oscillates between constructivist freedom and utter meaninglessness, and which forms the fundamental pattern of all melancholic dispositions that shape the aesthetic and theoretical tendencies of modernity.

4. The Fictionalization of the Horizon of Possibility and the Distinction Between Utopia and Optimization

The parallel shift—both technical and aesthetic—from imitation to construction signals a decisive moment in the culture of contingency: namely, the essential significance of a new, reflexive fictionalization of the horizon of possibility. What can be designed and invented is no longer determined cosmologically or theologically, but anthropologically, because it springs from unleashed human curiosity and imagination. Perhaps this fictionalization of the horizon of possibility is, in the end, indeed the defining moment of a modernity that has understood itself from the outset as a culture of an ontologically unbound and anthropologically bound capacity for construction, grounded in a human nature open to possibility. In any case, however, the fictionalization of the horizon of possibility is a process that has taken place in two distinct modes, which in turn underpin two different tendencies of political, social, aesthetic, and cultural modernity and correspond to two opposing modal-structural paradigms, namely utopia and optimization. At first glance, the difference between these two paradigms may seem just as trivial as the conceptual distinction, based on contingency, between mutability and changeability or the distinction, in modal theory, between plurality contingency and potentiality contingency; in reality, however, it is of structural rather than merely gradual significance, because it is just as crucial to the social embedding of technological development as it is to the autonomisation of the aesthetic and the various forms of their political instrumentalisation. The concept of utopia is an absolute concept. It implies the complete abolition of all contingency in an ideal and therefore unsurpassable state—in a new totality of experience that is as closed as it is concrete, and in an insurmountably final and therefore definitive order of reality. The concept of optimization, on the other hand, is a relative concept. It denotes the situationally extrapolated, in principle ceaseless, and irreducibly open-ended surpassing of every state within an abstract extensiveness of expectation—every seemingly given state, but above all every state achieved by one's own agency. One might see in this an exclusive modal-structural difference, because utopia aims at the suspension of all possibilities, while optimization unleashes the competition among pos-

sibilities that outdo one another. After all, optimization does not signal the abolition, elimination, or limitation of contingency, but rather its preservation, its perpetuation, its expansion, and its cultivation. This constitutes the fundamental difference that fails to attain analytical significance in the first place when the concept of utopia and the concept of optimization are blurred together and ultimately used synonymously. The realized utopia—to put the difference succinctly—eliminates contingency, whereas realized optimization makes contingency permanent. Optimization thus generates a disposition of fundamental incompleteness, while utopia strives for an ideal and therefore definitive order of reality. The fact that, strictly speaking, utopia thereby represents the modern option for a premodern structure of reality—because it is structurally situated within the closed horizon of cosmological or theological ontologies—is not its least significant characteristic.

5. The Elimination of Contingency through the Strategic Utilization of Contingency—Classical Modernity

The experience of meaninglessness and uncertainty bound not only the philosophical but also the political, social, and aesthetic self-conception of modernity—well into the 20th century—to the rationality of comprehensive expectations of order and reality, and in turn lent plausibility to counterfactual concepts of an order of reality that was both meaningful and definitive. The emphasis was thus almost inevitably placed on comprehensive and definitive constructs that would transcend all previous constructs and thereby overcome the contingency that seemed to have engulfed the entire world. If one were to distill this approach into a formula that could serve as an operational structural formula for the political, social, aesthetic, and philosophical creative aspirations of Classical Modernism, that formula would be: the definitive elimination of contingency through the strategic utilization of contingency. This has nothing to do, however, with what is commonly—and just as broadly and order-fixatedly—referred to as "managing contingency." Yet the comprehensive expectation of order and reality expressed by this formula nevertheless manifests the totalizing claim of an all-pervading reason that corresponds to the sovereign political, socio-technical, or aesthetic utopias which, in Classical Modernism, had all rationality on their side. Precisely in the self-evident nature of their claims to totality, these utopias were in fact situated on the horizon of the theological worldview and its secular derivative—the idea of an absolute, order-establishing authority—even if this authority were as abstract as Enlightenment reason.

But if technization—even where it remains purely instrumental—is the organized expansion of the constructive possibilities of human action, it generates not only an inescapable imperative to surpass all natural conditions, but also an irrefutable disposition toward the surpassability of all constructed realities. After all, there is no construct that cannot be superseded by another construct. Contingency is thus not only institutionalized on a sectoral basis, but also largely enshrined structurally. And this, precisely, has far-reaching consequences. For under these conditions, a culture of contingency paradoxically cannot consist in abolishing contingency within a new, definitive order of reality—as nearly all of Classical Modernism attempted to do by transforming an awareness of contingency into technical, aesthetic, and political fictions of sovereignty. Under these conditions, the establishment of a culture of contingency can consist only in integrating contingency into a new, fundamentally transitory order of reality. This, however, requires that the open-endedness of constructive action be affirmed and institutionalized through the establishment of lasting modal-structural dispositions, which in turn dispense with ontological justifications.

6. Limiting Contingency through Institutionalized Openness to Possibility—Consolidated Modernity

This renunciation underlies the ambitious self-justification of a modern society. Nevertheless, contingency is understood primarily as a problem and—in light of social insecurity, economic inequality, ecological crisis, and technological unpredictability—is virtually classified as a pathology of society. But what is understood as a problem and, as a pathology, evokes therapeutic expectations, is at the same time a general disposition that unfolds in the synthesis of processes of technization and aestheticization and has established itself as an institutionalized openness to possibility. Its systematic condition is the fictionalization of the horizon of possibility, which in principle confronts every state not only with its mutability but also with its surpassability. Its historical condition, however, is the immanent self-justification of the epoch in which social reality becomes the actual and all-determining reality, and the social fate of human beings becomes their general fate. In this centrality of the social, the transitory, the open-ended, and the infinite manifest themselves—elements that correspond not only to a modern society's emphasis on productivity and progress but also to the constitution of its genuine type of subjectivity, namely one that is open to different positions and statuses, grounded in multidimensional mobility, and oriented toward indivi-

dual self-unfolding in a life course open to various possibilities—an individual who becomes the genuine personality type of an optimization society. This personality type corresponds to a society in which the positivity of contingency has become established as a general mechanism for optimization—optimization not only in the concrete, transitive sense of specific technical, administrative, or economic improvements to forms of production, organization, distribution, and consumption, but also in the abstract, intransitive sense of a general way of life, an implicit mode of self-relation, and a self-evident focal point of the imagination. By encompassing not only specific objects and concrete functions but, above all, by underpinning indeterminate relationships to the self and abstract relationships to the world, this *dispositif* forms the modal structure of a social modernity that, while corresponding to the constructivist deep structure of a culture of contingency, but—unlike in Classical Modernity—establishes an abstract social world in which the permanent openness to possibility has all rationality on its side, in which the positivity of contingency is an unquestionable metaphysical given—and in which the competitive outdoing of every achieved state becomes an inescapable social compulsion. It is a social compulsion that, through the communicative normalization of contingency, gives rise to an absolutism of the social that seemingly no longer recognizes any "outside." Despite all experiences of uncertainty and meaninglessness, and despite the generalized competition that has become the principle of social organization, this absolutism of the social is, in the end, perhaps the real problem of a modernity that—only seemingly paradoxically—has consolidated itself through self-justification in the openness of possibility.

7. Theory of Modernity as a Critical Project

The absolutism of the social is not a pathology of the culture of contingency, and its specific transcendental dispositions—in which socialization and individualization form the complementary sides of a single *dispositif*—are not ideologies. Rather, both are forms of successful social self-constitution. They are forms that emerged in modernity and, through their institutionalization, have attained the status of unquestionable givens. The critical potential of a theory of the culture of contingency is directed at these taken-for-granted assumptions. After all, their specific manifestations—competitive optimization, communicative normalization, and the absolutism of the social—are also contingent and remain so even when the social coercion they exert lends them the appearance of necessity. The critique does not, however, claim that the social form of organized openness to possibilities declares something contingent to

be necessary and thereby turns against its own premises. Modern societies generate functional structures that are indispensable to their own constitution, even though they are contingent and remain so. Communication, sociality, participation, networking, and optimization are real, effective, and constitutive elements of modern societies. That is why their positivity is largely unquestioned. But they become objects of criticism when their unquestioned positivity becomes an unquestionable matter of course and thereby acquires the dignity of an irrefutable transhistorical truth.

If contingency is a historical modal structure and modernity is the culture of its institutionalization, then a critique of its implicit dispositions can neither be guided by external normative standards nor be limited to the internal contradictions of these dispositions. Rather, it must address the conditions of plausibility underlying their unquestioned certainties and deconstruct the unquestionable taken-for-granted assumptions that have arisen from these certainties. In a culture of contingency, competitive optimization, communicative normalization, and the absolutism of the social not only have all social rationality on their side—rather, this rationality has attained the ultra-significance of a natural given that is no longer problematized because it can successfully organize openness to possibility and realize society's self-justification within indeterminacy. However, the fact that it thereby also determines which possibilities can be perceived, articulated, and realized at all points to the flip side of this rationality. The critique is therefore directed not against modernity as such, but against those genuine dispositions of institutionalized openness to possibility that, as evidence of a society's self-constitution, have attained the status of axioms which marginalize, discriminate against, or exclude other possibilities for a modern relationship to the self and the world. That is why it is essential not to let any of these taken-for-granted assumptions pass unnoticed and not to leave any of these certainties unchallenged. And that is why the critical dimension of this theory of modernity is not a rejection of the culture of contingency—not even a partial one—but rather its productive application to itself.

This is what the texts collected in these pages stand for. "Modernity as an Ontological State of Emergency?" reconstructs the genesis of the modern experience of contingency from Walter Benjamin's theory of modernity and unfolds modernity as the loss of ontological taken-for-grantedness as well as an attempt at its aesthetic processing in the wake of European melancholy. "Modernity and Contingency" expands this perspective into a general theory of the modern era, in which contingency becomes the fundamental concept of a social and cultural self-understanding that treats it primarily as a problem to be solved either through socio-technical functionalism or through political

and aesthetic constructivism. Finally, "Theory of Mass Culture" examines the cultural formation in which contingency is no longer primarily problematized but is instead positively redefined—through communicative pressures to connect and competitive forms of socialization—as an open-ended possibility that can be organized. The three books, therefore, do not simply address different topics, but rather explore the same fundamental question from different perspectives and synthesize them into a historical-systematic theory of modernity. This fundamental question is: How is a society possible that constitutes itself under conditions of contingency that are as inescapable as they are thoroughly desirable? The articles, studies, and essays also take up this question. However, they are not supplements to the monographs, but rather elaborations of transitions, clarifications of tangential lines, and experimental in-depth explorations of aspects that are only hinted at in the books. Furthermore, they occasionally discuss subjects that do not seek an answer to this question and therefore lie only very distantly on the horizon of this theory of modernity.