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On the Concept of Contingency

1. The Ambivalence of the Contingent

Hardly any concept expresses the modal structure of a modern society as succinctly as the concept of contingency. Determining reality within the horizon of its possibilities, and proceeding on the assumption that that which is could also be otherwise, belongs to the elementary self-evidences of this society. This self-evidence, however, obscures the systematic problem of the concept. For it suggests that it is clear wherein the possibility of being-otherwise consists. Yet this is precisely not the case. The classical definition, according to which that is contingent which is neither necessary nor impossible, determines merely the relation of reality and possibility within the horizon of impossibility and necessity. It does not, however, explain how this relation itself is structured, because that which is can be possible otherwise in multiple respects.

To begin with, the concept of contingency is pronouncedly ambivalent. After all, neither necessary nor impossible is both that which is available and manipulable as well as that which is unavailable and coincidental. Contingency therefore designates that open domain of indeterminacy between necessity and impossibility in which not only actions, but also coincidences realize themselves. As decisions between several possibilities, actions can realize themselves only where things can also be otherwise. But precisely there, coincidences also occur. Both, actions and coincidences, thus realize themselves in the same domain of reality. An event is coincidental, however, only if, in contrast to action, it neither rests on a decision nor can be grounded or attributed to an actor, and must therefore be declared groundless.

2. The Limitations of the Contingent

Alongside this modal-ontological ambivalence of the concept steps a modal-structural ambiguity that concerns its availability side and is above all of relevance for its social-theoretical application. If action, in contrast to behaviour, is the decision between several possibilities, then the question arises as to the criterion that guides this decision. Not only for ancient praxeology was this criterion experience, which corresponded to a possibility-consciousness that was restricted to the objects of human efficacy. In this lay not only the boun-

dedness of the human domain of action imposed by ancient cosmology; human power also lacked that which transcended the present and immediate domain of practice in the sense of the determinable ensemble of actions of concrete groups and subjects. Therefore, Antiquity knew neither a supra-particular universalism, nor did it have a claim to knowledge or shaping totality directed at a whole. Contingent were therefore only events, but not the reality in which these events were executed as actions or occurred as coincidences. Accordingly, action related exclusively to empirical objects and intersubjective relations that stood within a finite horizon of possibility—and under this presupposition, it could reasonably relate only to these. While the domain of action could be extended within this horizon of possibility and expanded in many respects, it could not for its part be otherwise, because the horizon of possibility was ontologically given and could therefore not become an object of human action.

This restriction is important in a structural respect. For action as a decision between several existing possibilities does not, in principle, reach beyond the horizon of given possibilities under these conditions. And contingency manifests itself here as a plurality of possibilities that, strictly speaking, are alternative realities. However, orienting action toward a concrete plurality of other actors and alternative realities results in the almost a priori—and therefore unreflected—politicization of our entire relationship with the world. This politicization is not understood in the ideological or partisan sense of the term, but in its structural sense, where the horizon of social action fundamentally extends no further than the sum of the actors involved, their various particular positions, and the realities represented within them at any given moment. Hence the presentist nature of a reality defined by the momentary evidence of positional constellations. While it acknowledges real options, it recognizes no potential options.

3. The Unbounding of the Contingent

The modal-structural restriction of contingency to the selective plurality of concrete real possibilities, which continues to remain a theme of practical philosophy and political theory, recedes in the Early Modern period behind the modal-structural opening of contingency-consciousness—which, incidentally, demonstrates fully that contingency is a pronounced product of reflection. Since then, contingent are not only the realia through which action realizes itself, but also the reality in which these realia stand, so that the ambivalence of the contingent as a domain of action and a domain of coincidence—that is, the ambivalence between that which is available and that which is un-

available—now receives a very different quality, through which the domain of action itself becomes available and manipulable. Thereby, contingency is not only dimensioned differently, but generates a possibility-consciousness that points beyond its hitherto ontological restrictions not merely gradually, but structurally, because it orients itself no longer merely by the plurality of current realities, but by the potentiality of future possibilities.

This distinction is essential for any use of the concept of contingency, because it signifies not merely a terminological refinement, 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 limited space of real possibilities, in which action moves within a given ensemble of concrete alternatives, steps the limitless horizon of fictional possibilities, in which action directs itself towards the opening up of new options. Thus, however, the finality of action changes as well. Where contingency designates plurality, action is essentially transitive. It is directed at concrete objects and takes place as a selection among them. Its mode of operation is selection. Where contingency, by contrast, designates potentiality, action is essentially intransitive. It is directed at the abstract expansion of the horizon of possibility itself. Its mode of operation is construction and the experimentally goal-open—yet not goalless—opening up and invention of hitherto non-existing possibilities.

4. On the Currency of the Concept of Contingency

The consequences of this distinction reach far beyond conceptual systematics. For with it corresponds how freedom, politics, technology, art, progress, or critique are thought. Where contingency is determined according to the logic of plurality, freedom appears as choice between given possibilities, and politics becomes the organization of their coexistence. Where contingency, by contrast, is determined according to the logic of potentiality, freedom appears as the capacity for opening up and realizing new possibilities. Not politics, but technology, science, and art then become paradigmatic forms of a practice that transforms the horizon of the feasible itself. Plurality-contingency and potentiality-contingency therefore designate not two variants of the same state of affairs, but two different ways of organizing the relation of reality and possibility in general. A history of the concept of contingency can therefore not be reconstructed as a continuous expansion of a uniform state of affairs. Rather, it is the history of a categorical difference within possibility-consciousness itself, which shows that very different and partly opposed societal dispositions are subsumed under the concept of contingency.

Against this background, contemporary contingency semantics also gains a more precise meaning. When it is declared that contingency is an intrinsic value of complex societies, or when universal meta-narratives are particularized and thus rendered contingent, it remains unclear in both cases which contingency is meant. In fact, both theoretical positions frequently operate with a concept of contingency that describes the plurality of simultaneously existing possibilities and determines contingency primarily as selectivity. Yet precisely thereby, the second form of contingency is obscured, which makes the horizon of possibility itself the object of societal practice and forms the central modal structure of early modern contingency culture and its modern variations. On this basis, a peculiarity of the classical concept of contingency can also be determined more precisely that continues to have an effect today. If contingency is understood as the plurality of existing possibilities, then freedom necessarily appears as freedom of choice. Contingency becomes selectivity. Precisely therein lies the systematic continuity between ancient praxeology and those modern theories that determine contingency as the selectivity of complex realities.

5. On the Critical Function of the Concept of Contingency

The critique of early modern modernity did not abandon the concept of contingency, but pitted its concrete plurality dimension against its abstract potentiality dimension, thereby changing its systematic locus. Here lies the real significance of that which has been negotiated under the concept of postmodernity since the 1970s. The grand narratives of progress, emancipation, or historical reason were discarded because they privileged potentiality-contingency. The critique was therefore directed not against the possibility of being-otherwise in general, but against that modal structure that placed the possible itself into the horizon of unlimited increasability, optimizability, and availability. Postmodernity therefore engaged not in the dismissal of contingency, but in the valorisation of plurality-contingency against potentiality-contingency. In place of abstract potentiality was to step real plurality, and contingency no longer meant that the whole of reality could fundamentally become otherwise, but that different realities exist simultaneously and relativize one another.

With this, not least social critique changes. As long as potentiality-contingency dominates, it aims at the transformation and transgression of the given. It derives its standard from a possibility that is not yet realized. Critique then possesses a progress-logical dimension. Where plurality-contingency determines the horizon of possibility, by contrast, the future loses its privi-

leged position and the transgression of the given loses its critical significance. The relativization of one's own reality occurs then 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 changes as well. In place of one's own history step other cultures; in place of the reconstruction of historical development steps the description of present difference; and in place of the question regarding the direction of societal transformation steps the question regarding the recognition of existing differences. The shift of the epistemological reference of social theory from historiography to ethnology is therefore more than a mere methodical change. It marks the transition from a potentiality-logical to a plurality-logical modality of the world-relation in the theory of society.

6. Politics and Conceptual Politics

This shift has not least considerable political consequences. Where potentiality-contingency dominates, societal practice is directed at innovation, self-unfolding, optimization, and self-optimization. Where plurality-contingency dominates, the emphasis shifts to recognition, representation, identity, and self-realization. Politics is no longer determined by the question of what should become, but by the question of who must be recognized. Against this background, contemporary identity politics can also be determined more precisely. It is neither merely a moral movement nor merely a consequence of new social conflicts; rather, it is the expression of the plurality-logical modal structure under large-scale societal conditions. Its normative reference points are not abstract possibilities of becoming-otherwise, but concrete realities of being-thus. It demands not further possibilities, but the recognition of existing realities. Precisely for this reason, it possesses a transitive character. It is directed at existing identities, existing communities, and existing cultural inventories. Its reference point remains the real. Here lies at the same time its ambivalence. On the one hand, it forms the necessary objection against that optimization-driven dissolution of boundaries that perceives every reality only under the aspect of its outdoability and elevates creative destruction to an organizing principle of society. On the other hand, it tends to tie the horizon of possibility back to the present.

Perhaps herein lies the central signature of the present. It is determined neither by the unrestricted rule of potentiality-contingency nor by the complete renaissance of plurality-contingency. Rather, both modal structures collide in it directly and by no means without conflict. The struggles over diversity, identity, innovation, progress, belonging or placelessness, locality or globali-

ty, are therefore not merely political disputes. They are not merely struggles over the respective right form of life. They are also the expression of two different ways of positively organizing contingency. The question is therefore not whether modern societies are determined by contingency. The question is rather when and under what conditions the one or the other form of contingency organizes the world-relation of a modern society and orients the self-relation of its individuals. And how.