Robert Musil – novelist, psychologist, sociologist

Contributions to classical sociology and the analysis of modernity

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Paper

Robert Musil – the novelist's significance to classical sociology and the analysis of modernity

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1.

In one of his sociologically significant excursions into the history of ideas, Hans Blumenberg (1987: 57) summarises the experience of modernity in the notion of a 'culture of contingency': modernity is an epoch in which nothing is essentially necessary and everything could have been otherwise. An dnot only that – modernity and everything it comprises – experiences, action, interaction, transformations, events… – may be interpreted in different ways, simultaneously, ways that may be consistent, inconsistent, similar, dissimilar.

Niklas Luhmann, in turn, writes that modernity 'formulates' its own 'proper values' in 'the modal form of contingency' (1992: 47, cf. 93–128); as such, it relates to the world as something that is 'neither necessary nor impossible' (1984: 152).

Accordingly, any understanding of modernity, whether as culture, society, mentality or a type of action, must acknowledge contingency and ambiguity. Moreover, understanding must reflect these characteristics, which are the prerequisites of knowledge of and in modern society. Theory, epistemology and ontology must not and cannot be entirely separated.

No other discourse on modernity has come to manifest this fate more than sociology – willingly or not. From the beginning, sociology aspired to become the science of modernity. And, from its outset,

sociology was determined by contingency. Georg Simmel (1989a: 100, cf. Ernst, 1907: 8–9) stated that sociology, like cognition in general, was a 'free-floating process' (*freischwebender Prozeß*) and that it was 'perfectly acceptable that our image of the world "floats in the air" because the world itself does so.' Simmel heralded the sociology of knowledge, which was, less than a generation later, to become one of sociology's key inventions (or discoveries). Karl Mannheim, for instance and par excellence, outlined the '*essentially relational structure of human cognition*' (1985: 257–258), which was caused by and generated contemporary life's 'existential aporia' (1985: 38) and 'fundamental discord' (1985: 47) as it unfolds through realities characterised by 'twilight' and 'relativity' (1985: 76–77).

In a kindred observation of the condition of 'Western' cognition and perception, Blumenberg (1964: 13–14, cf. Berger, 1970) depicts how modern realities, whether cultural or individual, constitute 'realities of open contexts' that 'refuse any unambiguous understanding, any certain action.' In fact, 'for the modern epoch, reality is a context' (Blumenberg, 1964: 21) and any understanding, scientific or not, is dependent on, nourished by, a set of complex, ambiguous criteria.

2.

Modernity as culture of contingence reached a peak level during classical modernity. Classical modernity was the epoch just before and after the turn of the century 1800–1900, it was the epoch of profound and extensive social transformation, differentiated in processes of industralisation, secularisation, urbanisation, individualisation. Classical modernity meant the experience of permanent, fundamental transition. Society, time, life emerged as eternal passage. "All that was solid melted into air", the *Communist Manifesto* stated. It was the "age of the provisional", Paul Valéry would write. A time of "transcendental homelessness", the young Georg Lukács wrote.

At the same time, modernity as culture of contingency was never reflected as conspicuously as in the discourse of classical modernity which prevailed until around 1933. It was a momentous, transgressing and formidably creative discourse expressed in the arts, literature, archictecture, music, cultural philosophy, journalism,

the essay. What would become classical sociology, not last German classical sociology, may be perceived of as a sub-discourse of classical modern reflection. It analysed society's transformations and the transformations of mentalities, and it returned to experiences of cntingency and ambivalence, relativity and heterogeneity, transition and crisis, of increasing complexity of coexistence of differences – of those experiences that made modernity modern.

3.

Robert Musil, the Austrian novelist and essayist and author of *The Man Without Qualities*, was a prominent contributor to the classical modern style of thought. Musil's biography was vital and typical: he was a trained engineer, had a great interest in mathematics, and later received a PhD in psychology and philosophy in Berlin, only to alter his life course again and become a writer and devote his intellect to the novel and the essay, or, more precisely, that genre which became typical and was called the reflexive or the intellectual novel, the essayistic novel, or the the epistemological novel (Broch in Kundera 20017: 67).

Musil's proximity to the sociology of classical modernity is manifest and differentiated. As a student, he had attended Simmel's lectures. The readings of Simmel, Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, Georges Sorel, Leopold von Wiese and Joseph Schumpeter are explicitly discussed in his diaries. Musil was an observer; his sociological gaze penetrated the life worlds of the social and the psyche. His efforts to understand and explore the realities and possibilities of modern life were scientifically pointed but not reduced to formal scientific method and theory. Correspondingly, Musil's work appears in sociological reflection not merely as an illustration but as a sociological reflection in its own right. Peter Berger, for instance, has returned to Musil in a number of texts, but there are a number of other examples.

I will point to three major sets of questions and topicsa in Musil's work which virtually qualify him as a sociologist: 1) the shapelessness of man, 2) the relation between reason and sentiments, and 3) functional stupidity. I will also point to some

rather epistemological or conceptual features which render immediate sociological relevance to Musil

3.

Habitually, Musil is known as the author of one of the most important novels of the 20th century: *The Man without qualities*. The book was published in 1930 and 1932, yet was never finished. Circumstances were of course sinister. What influence could the author of an essayistic, experimental, seemingly endless novel about a man without qualities possibly have on a world that had been penetrated to its bare soul by political religions (red, brown and black), a world determined by nervousness and extremes and which now cried out for totality and messianic leaders?

The novel, according to Musil (1978c: 1410), really is not a novel 'at all' but rather an essay of 'immense dimensions'. It may be considered as synthesis – or as the collapse of genres. It generally asks the question of modernity. What does modernity mean, what is the logics of modernity, its constitution, its characteristics? What does modern culture do to man, what are the common forms of socialisation? What is 'the psyche' of culture? (Harrington, 2002a: 66) Surely, Musil explicitly and carefully situates man in his historical, social, cultural context, perceives of him as an on-going result of the processes of modernisation – secularisation, urbanisation, individualisation.

Yet the novel is not merely interpretation and composition. It is also an 'intellectual and spiritual expedition', a 'research odyssey' (1978b: 1940) into the human possible to the possible human. Fundamentally, 'life is always more exhaustive than its actual results' (Musil, 1978b: 1439), and 'possible realities' are more appealing than 'real possibilities' (1995a: 12). The figure of Ulrich, the man without qualities, is an affirmation of the culture of contingency.

4.

Modernity as culture of contingency affirms the key anthropological thesis which Musil brings forward. Essentially, it is an argument

which fits well to both the experience of humanity in the modern age and the fundamental if not always explicit ideas of man which governed classical sociology and continues to do so today.

Throughout his work, Musil returns to a set of questions and reflections that he summarises in the *theorem of human shapelessness* (*Theorem der menschlichen Gestaltlosigkeit*, see Musil, 1994b, 1994c, 1995a: 234, 270, 391, 449). Musil writes that man's essence is his form and that man's form is conferred on him by history. Man is 'the quintessence of his possibilities', 'potential man' (1995a: 270), something 'malleable' (1994b: 114), 'a liquid mass that has to be shaped' (1978d: 1348). Man, Musil continues, emerges as a 'substratum' whose 'good and evil range equally widely in him, like the pointer on a sensitive scale' (1994b: 114). Consequently, 'human nature is as capable of cannibalism as it is of the *Critique of Pure Reason*' (1995a: 391). In brief, man is an *Ungestalt* (1994b: 113), an *amorphism*, at the disposal of himself and others, for autonomy and heteronomy, for the beautiful and for the bloody, for stupidity and possibly for genius. In general, man's amorphous nature is laid bare in the very logic of modernity and its very principle, the 'P.I.C.', the 'Principle of Insufficient Cause', which states that 'everything that happens happens for no good or sufficient reason' (Musil, 1995a: 140) – it could have happened in another way as well, or not at all.

Man's amorphous nature corresponds with modern culture, with modern society. The entire modern culture, Musil (1994c: 171–172) states, appears as an 'undirected condition, a leftover abject confusion, like iron filings scattered in an unmagnetised field.' Everything exists simultaneously, next to each other, through each other, in each other in an 'infinitely interwoven surface' (1995a: 709) of realities and possibilities. This reflection corresponds with Georg Lukács' (1971: 67) view that the vital problem of modernity was the 'mutually determining' realities of the 'problematic individual' and the 'contingent world.'

Musil's idea of the shapelessness of man is valid for man as a species as well as for each individual. It is also true for man as collective, man in the collectivised form. Collectivisation was the characteristic of the time and included conformity, opportunism and subordination. It would be manifest through the masses of

democratic cultures (already observed by Alexis de Tocqueville), but the typical variant was totalitarianism. Totalitarianism was the fundamental overhaul of society, of man. Totalitarianism was a true modern invention, possible only in a culture of contingency, and at the time also promoted by this very culture.

Musil formulates an entirely realistic anthropology. Man is reality and possibility alike; he is the realisation of what had once emerged as historical options, and he expresses options for further realisations. He constitutes a historical variation, a critical combination in a state of permanent crisis. He is at the same time a resource, a matter for himself, a human form capable of many things or anything.

Two reflections with regard to sociology and especially classical sociology:

The idea of the shapelessness of man had a history and it had its contemporary variations. Nietzsche had outlined the images of 'the death of God' (1988a: #125) and of man as 'the animal that is not yet defined' (1988b: #62). Simmel (1991: 123, 115) denies any 'anthropological unity,' any 'absolute' subjectivity or soul; such ideas, he says (1989c: 182, 185), are mere 'superstition'. Rather, Simmel presents man's modern 'essence' as a 'crossing of countless social threads' (1989b: 241), as an 'intersection between the self and an unknown circle of injunctions' (1996a: 404). Consequently, the modern 'soul' is in a state of 'transmutability', a 'permanent fluctuation' between moving and changing conditions and, accordingly, 'less a succession between Yes and No and more of their simultaneousness' (Simmel, 1996b: 341). Weber varied this idea, this experience of psychic hypertrophy that is typical of modern man. Modernity 'besieges' man; he is but a function, a reflection of the steadily more complex realities in society (Weber, 1988a: 453). On the eve of classical modernity, the philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner (1975, cf. Fischer, 2000), a lonely liberal in the Weimar Republic, identified the human condition as 'eccentricity' (*exzentrische Positionalität*): man is a reflexive form of life, and as such, his relation to the external world is open and undetermined. After 1933, Arnold Gehlen (1986, 1997) described man's 'essential lack of instincts' and his lack of specialisation (in turn, a human specialisation): man is fundamentally 'open to the world' and exposed to a permanent 'sensory overload'. Habits and

institutions emerge and constitute defensive responses to this modern dilemma and to modernity as dilemma. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann would virtually copy this idea in their influential work on *The Social Construction of Reality*. Another prominent anthropology of the shapelessness was to be presented by Michel Foucault. Man, he said, is but a historical being – talking, living, working, disciplined, sexual, normal, abnormal, a historically contingent form, a transitory outcome of normative, political, everyday and scientific practices. Man is repeatedly proven to be a realisation of the possible – man is 'the plenitude of the possible' (Foucault, 1983: 145).

The other idea much promoted by Musil's theorem on man's shapelessness accentuates yet another core idea of classical and later sociology, namely that man and society, action and culture, concur with each other closely so that one may be separated from the other merely analytically. It became paradigmatic already in Tönnies' (1991) work on the relations between *Gemeinschaft* and *Wesenwille* and between *Gesellschaft* and *Kürwille*. Notably, Tönnies emphasises the anthropological or psychological side of the matter, not the sociological. The most elaborate discussion may perhaps be found in Weber's sociology. Man as such is 'situated' (*hineingestellt*) in social contexts, Weber (1988c: 13) writes; his 'life conduct' emerges and develops and is moulded by historically given 'life-spheres' such as capitalism, science, and religion (1958a: 123). Between life conduct and life-spheres, there is a compelling correspondence or adequacy. In modern society, essentially a man-made society (that is, a culture), the adequate type of humanity is 'cultural man' (*Kulturmensch*) (Weber, 1992: 18). Riesman (1950) builds on Weber's legacy and emphasises the relation between types of character and society. He becomes a key figure in conceptually establishing the vital relation between man and his social context. C Wright Mills, Christopher Lasch, Richard Sennett would continue in Weber's and Riesman's footsteps.

5.

The second key idea in Musil's writings concern a rather eternal, yet very modern dilemma, namely, the relation between reason and sentiments, between what he calls 'precision and soul.' It is a

decisive relationship for history, for man, for the spirit, for peace; it is a fateful question.

The habitual sociological narrative of modernity is that of rationalisation, specialisation, institutionalisation and secularisation. It is a prosaic age, 'the age of facts' (Musil, 1994c: 176). 'One can, in principle, *master* all things by *calculation,*' reads Weber's (1958: 139) formula. Ernst Troeltsch (1922: 778) observes a world that strives for 'unity' through rationalism; rationalism, in turn, is the opposite of contingency. To Simmel, calculation, rationality, institutionalisation, technology and bureaucracy are predestined to an autonomous development that seizes human will and subjectivity. This produces nothing less than 'the tragedy of culture' (Simmel, 1996a), a culture whereby the world is reduced to an 'arithmetical problem' (1989a: 612). In the most pitiless of all verdicts, modernity is a 'mathematised', 'liquidated' world (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1988: 31, 19). This process is intensified: 'accelerationism,' Musil writes (1995a: 436), is the super-ideology of the modern world, an auto-dynamics that sweeps everything along with it that is not left at that. Much later, Hartmut Rosa and Judy Wajcman would again discover the accelerating nature of social transformation.

However, Musil emphasises that modernity also signifies amplified emotionality. The relation between reason and sentiments is characterised by an increased imbalance and capriciousness. Changes are swift. The scope as well as the intensity of both intellect and feelings grow, and they appear to move in any direction and for no obvious reason. Musil's observations are not distant from Emile Durkheim's considerations on anomie.

For Musil, the volatile relation between intellect and emotion (he varies the theme by talking of mathematics and mysticism, truth and subjectivity, modernity and religion, precision and soul, the profane and the sacred), is an essential cause of modernity's pathologies. This volatile relation was a vital cause of that 'final explosion' of the First World War and had been latent – indeed, 'prepared' – for a long time (Musil, 1978e: 1343). The war broke out and created a world of yesterday. This was not because of nationalism and colonialism, which were mere 'intermediate causes' (1978e: 1343); rather, the origin was general and 'European' (1978e: 1343). For an extended period, any war seemed impossible. However, just before the

outbreak – in fact, ‘overnight’ (1978e: 1342) – it became inevitable and desired. Ancient, forgotten, obscure, enchanted thoughts and convictions reappeared, people all over Europe ‘had enough of peace’ (1978e: 1343). The war was ‘the will for disorder rather than the old order, the leap into adventure’, a ‘flight from peace’ (1994b: 112).

The Great War expressed a ‘recurrent phenomenon in world history’ (1978e: 1343). Musil refers to the recurrence of ‘metaphysical bangs’ that pile up in times of peace like ‘residues of discontent.’ They embody a ‘revolution of the soul’ against the existing mentality or social order (1994d: 129). Or they constitute a reaction to the contemporary, typical ‘ratioide’ human form, that ‘trained vulgarity’ (Musil, 1994c: 160, 182), that ‘nullity’ of which Weber spoke in the final sections of *The Protestant Ethics*. (Weber, 1988d: 204). Outcomes are subordinated, wrath and fanaticism are everything; it is a total and totalising experience that provides an existential foundation beyond conventional modern rationality and individuality. In their respective reflections, expressed in a pronounced vitalist vocabulary well beyond conventional sociology, Martin Buber (quoted in Koren, 2010: 100) defined the eruption of the Great War as the ‘Vesuvian hour,’ and Simmel (quoted in Blumenberg, 1983: 47) declared the sudden paroxysm an ‘absolute situation.’

For Musil, perennial metaphysical crashes are a result of shapeless excesses of emotions that are inconsistent with or oppressed by reason. From time to time, emotions explode in fanaticism, that ‘formless excess of feelings’ (Musil, 1994e: 22) that searches for shape and an abode and that may be ingeniously combined with discipline under a totalitarian regime.

Musil’s account of the cultural and mental situation in which the Great War begins is a statement on what he considers the insufficiency of the social and cultural sciences. In their conventional form, these are utterly modern; they take on disenchanted entities or intermediary causes and contexts such as nationalism, colonialism and rationalisation. However, humans and cultures are also driven by other motives. Revolutions of the soul, recurrent metaphysical bangs, fanatical leaps into adventures and other irrational eruptions emerge as inconceivable in a society with a general formula of mastering by calculation. Musil’s own ’science of man’ integrates

and combines different elements of cultural science, psychology, sociology, the novel and the essay, and Musil himself thought that his colossal essayistic novel expressed the most severe type of understanding of a field in which theoretical and methodological precision are insufficient.

6.

Musil had an interest in stupidity and its opposite, genius. Stupidity, which Musil never properly defines, is a manifestation of both the human real and the human possible. Man is similarly inventive and imaginative with regard to stupidities as with regard to matters of reason and wisdom and, possibly, genius. For Musil, this understanding pertains to the two ideas of human shapelessness and the problematic relation between reason and sentiments. Both problems demonstrate profound contingency and volatility. Both also express modern dilemmas, a dilemmatic modernity; they express, in fact, modernity as dilemma, as impassibility, as aporia.

Musil distinguishes between two types of stupidity. The less interesting, banal type is what he calls ‘permanent’ or ’constitutional’ stupidity. We may also call it idiocy or hopeless imbecillity. It’s timeless.

What Musil calls ’functional stupidity’, on the other hand, constitutes an ‘elevated’ (Musil, 1994a: 275) type of stupidity. It may not be specifically modern, yet still typically modern. It should, in most cases, be considered a consequence of encouragement, education, and institutionalisation beyond imposition and free will. Generally, functional stupidity is a sign of simultaneous intelligence and subjugation, autonomy and heteronomy. It is modernity doing the splits, its own squared circle – a modern specialty, a specialty that makes modernity modern.

Functional stupidity is typically present in collective, in totalitarian societies – and at the time, these societies dominated Europe. Totalitarianism, Musil writes, was the most menacing and murderous political form of stupidity in the sense that individual qualities and needs, including different elements of stupidity, became socially imitated and turned into collective ‘arrogance’ by and in the ‘body

politic' (imitation as an elementary form of social life had been discovered by Gabriel Tarde) (Musil, 1994a: 273, 285). These elements, Musil says, included tendencies (readiness, willingness, ability) towards exaggeration, unrestraint, contempt, patronisation, revenge and malice: I became we, and we were the party, the nation, the class, the race, sects, art styles. Weber (1988d: 204) described these tendencies as 'convulsive self-importance.'

If this 'social imitation of mental defects' (Musil 1994a: 285) was inflicted, it was not necessarily also stupid. However, if it was voluntary (and it often was), it expressed a fatal stupidity. Functional stupidity: the individual subordinates himself to the collective (the party, the nation, the race, or: intelligence reports itself to stupidity, and carries out its duties, bravely and adequately and either rationally or fanatically, whereupon recognition, significance and career follow.

The intellect becomes an element of the terror, of a uniform mental life where every disparate thought, every counter-argument, every question is illegitimate. It expresses an intentional stupidification, corresponding to the institutions and expectations of society, through which individuals, their intellects, are socialised.

In his discussions on types of stupidities, but also generally in his giant novel, where he had developed a typology of men (antagonistic, complementary) that corresponds to and expresses a society and its institutions, Musil approaches core dispositions of classical sociology and beyond. Classical sociology profoundly was based on typologies – of actions, of societies, of personalities.

Tönnies (1991: xlii) constructed 'normal types' to interpret society's and man's transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from *Wesenwille* to *Kürwille*. More than any other writer, Weber stressed not only the option but also the necessity for sociology to develop typologies. To Weber, this endeavour should express social science as a 'science of *man*' (*Wissenschaft vom Menschen*) that sought to establish the '*quality of humans*' (*Qualität der Menschen*) (Weber 1988c: 13). Social science should thus ask 'characterological' or 'characterogenetic' questions (Weber, 1978: 50). Simmel generated a series of socio-psychological types alongside his forms of interaction (see Simmel, 1989a, ch. 6). Robert Ezra Park, a student

of Simmel in Berlin, outlined ‘the marginal man’ as the ‘personality type’ that is socialised on the margin between two or more cultures and who knows all there is to know about ‘spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness and *malaise*’ (Park 1928: 893). Later, Erich Fromm (1994: 275–296) would take up these conceptual discussions in the notion of the ‘social character,’ a notion that was applied and unfolded in David Riesman’s (1950) study on ‘the lonely crowd.’

And actually: Musil set out on his intellectual undertaking as an effort to develop what he called a ‘science of man’ (Musil, 1983a: 137; cf. Vatan, 2000) where ’human types’, *Typus Mensch*, were key instruments.

7.

I believe a reading of Robert Musil, his great novel, his minor fiction, his many essays, renders possible an extended reflexive space for those who want to analyse the foundations of modernity and of its tranformations. Musi brings forward problems, topics and concepts that are well compatible with the science of modernity, that is sociology. He also extends the space of questions and perspectives beyond sociology proper and accordingly demonstrates some limitations in sociology.