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Void, abundance

– Images and experiences of classical modernity

Bo Isenberg*

The following text offers an outline of classical modern reflection (sociology, cultural theory, literature) on the constitution and transformation of modernity, its cultural and mental dispositions. The discussion focuses on key themes and experiences of classical modernity: void, crisis and abundance. It is argued that classical modernity may be conceived as a conceptual archive of influential ideas on culture today. Core references are Siegfried Kracauer, Georg Lukács, Robert Musil, Joseph Roth, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies.

<https://research.kent.ac.uk/socril/crisis-knowledge-history-law-29-january-2016/>

Intro

Crisis has been a recurrent, indeed a defining notion throughout the history of sociology and cultural theory. Crisis as notion has in turn reflected crisis as permanent experience, permanent disposition of modernity. Modernity *is* crisis – a critical state of indecision, irresolution, oblivion, excess, exhaustion.

Explicitly, there have been a number of theoretical or conceptual elaborations of the critical state of modernity.

(And I might say now that this presentation is built up thought plenty of quotations, and I might want to not to mark every time I quote.)

Alfred Weber defines sociology as "the daughter of crisis", or simply the offspring of modernity.¹ Nicolaus Sombart describes how the experience of crisis assumes conceptual status through Comte and Saint-Simon: the revolution and from now on the constant possibility of further revolutionary alterations, accentuate the epoch as "transition", a "godforsaken, abandoned" epoch – the analysis of which would require a certain "science of crisis".² Reinhart Koselleck, working at the time closely with Sombart on a general outline of modernity as global civil war

¹ Weber, "Der Mensch und die Zeiten", 496.

² Sombart, "Henri de Saint-Simon und Auguste Comte", 100; "Heidelberger Lehrjahre", F.A.Z., 12. April, 1997.

(*Weltbürgerkrieg*; Schmitt, Arendt, later Agamben all deploy the notion), provides us with the perhaps most pointed proposition of crisis as modern property (*Eigenschaft*). Modernity is a "state of permanent crisis", crisis is the "signature of the Modern Epoch", the "elastic conceptual paradigm of modernity", Koselleck writes.³ As experience and as concept, it is inseparable from critique. Critique and crisis are each others precondition and outcome. The two dispositions are specifically modern, they are constitutive, regulative, significant and typical, and as dialectic elements they provide the modern epoch with its genuinely *historical* character and qualify it as an epoch of permanent, indeed "pathogenic" change and anarchy. Elsewhere, Koselleck interprets the emergence and unfolding of modernity by deploying Mannheimian notions: modernity means the growing separation between "spaces of experience" and "horizons of expectation"; in fact, that expanding gap is modernity as crisis.⁴

The recurrent notion of crisis has conceptual variants that have accompanied social and cultural science from their beginnings and underlined them as sciences of modernity as crisis, or simply of crisis. The *conventional* sociological repertoire would consist of the notions of capitalism, urbanisation, secularisation, individualisation. These in turn are but substantiations of the fundamental concepts of complexity, differentiation, transformation, ambiguity,

³ Koselleck, "Krise", 627, 631. Cf. Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise*, 134; "Vergangene Zukunft der frühen Neuzeit", 27f.

⁴ Koselleck, "'Erfahrungsraum' und 'Erwartungshorizont'"

plurality, impassibility, aporia, heterogeneity, liquidity. Of crisis.

Yet, the notion whose affinity to the crisis discourse is perhaps strongest, is *contingency*.

Niklas Luhmann describes how modernity "formulates" its own "proper values" in "the modal form of contingency"⁵ and thus relates to the world as something that is "neither necessary nor impossible".⁶ Modernity, he states, is characterised by its "excess of possibilities" and accordingly subject to a "coercion of selection" rather than that of "tradition".⁷ To Hans Blumenberg, modernity is a "culture of contingency": that which exists, could have been different or not at all, realities "no longer send out any superior justification, any superior assent"⁹, but rather constitute "realities of open contexts" which "refuse any unambiguous understanding, any certain action"; in fact, "for the modern epoch, reality is a context".¹⁰ In yet another variation of the notion of contingency, Michael Makropoulos depicts "the general strategic disposition" or "structural formula" of modernity as "the targeted processing of contingency".¹¹

Crisis and contingency ought to be understood as *historical–sociological concepts* derived from fundamental modern

⁵ Luhmann, *Beobachtungen*, 47, cf. 93–128.

⁶ Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*, 152.

⁷ Luhmann, "Sinn als Grundbegriff der Soziologie", 57f.

⁸ Blumenberg, *Sorge*, 57.

⁹ Blumenberg, "Lebenswelt und Technisierung unter Aspekten der Phänomenologie", 47

¹⁰ Blumenberg, "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeit des Romans", 21.

¹¹ Makropoulos, *Modernität und Kontingenz*, 32. For an extensive collection of discussions on the notion and experience of contingency, see von Graevenitz and Marquard (eds), *Kontingenz*.

experiences. Their meaning and their implementation must be varied.

And so we come to the proper subject of this presentation.

We might understand *classical modernity*, that is, the time period from the late nineteenth century to 1933 in primarily Western Europe, and perhaps especially the Weimar Republic, in terms of *radical crisis*, or *radical contingency*, thus *radical modernity*. We might also analyse the *contemporary globalised, neoliberal world* in terms of *radical, permanent crisis or contingency*.¹² And in between these radicalisations of culture, during *the decades following the second World War*, we witness what in relation to Makropoulos' writings has been labelled *consolidated* (or better: *consolidating*) contingency, a recognised, manageable crisis, a managed modernity that allowed or encouraged government, embodied in the welfare state and its egalitarian aspirations and practices, as well as in mass culture, mass consumption, social mobility, meritocracy and middle class conduct of life – obviously categories that have become precarious and might soon be obsolescent.¹³

Let me present some concepts and propositions that were central in the discourse which attempted to understand and exhibit the world of classical modernity. They make explicit the epoch as crisis, as radical, excessive culture of contingency, that sweeping, profound experience which

¹² Cf. Bauman, *State of Crisis*.

¹³ *Ästhetik & Kommunikation*, Nr. 168, 2015, special issue on Michael Makropoulos' theory of post-war modernity. Cf. Whyte, *Organization Man*.

made modernity modern. And I surely believe they are applicable or pointed for the understanding of our present critical situation; for instance, Detlev Peukert, in his outstanding work on the Weimar culture, argues strongly in this way.¹⁴ Perhaps it would be fair to say that classical modern reflection is the *conceptual archive* where that postmodern way of understanding the world which has today become commonplace, if not the norm – which would be a rather strange irony – got its key ideas.¹⁵

I will stick to rather reknown authors and their ideas. They come from different areas – social theory, cultural philosophy, the essay, the intellectual novel, yet they represented similar intellectual dispositions, similar styles of thought, and asked similar questions and delivered answers – proper conceptual or rather metaphorical – that constituted variations of a few, recurrent themes.

Two of these themes may be labeled *void* and *abundance*. They do not constitute any opposites, rather they may be said to have been reflected in each other. A matter of *transmutability*, that is, the one and the other, simultaneously.

So – two brief conceptual catalogues expressing variations and combinations:

¹⁴ Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik. Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne* and "The Weimar Republic – Old and New Perspectives".

¹⁵ Isenberg, "Postmodernity and its archive. The Principle of insufficient reason revisited".

Void

Siegfried Kracauer made inquiries into the “situation of the soul” of a humanity penetrated by modern society – or of the *vergesellschafteten Menschen*.¹⁶ This situation, he says, was characterised by “relativism”, by “isolation”, by “exile”. Man was “lingering in the void” and in constant, constitutive fear of the “horror vacui”. Some would be “refugees from the vacuum”, seeking “sheltering abode” in the political religions of the time. Very few would acknowledge the situation and endure (Kracauer obviously had one such “desperado” in mind, namely Max Weber).

In his beautiful, wounded, pre-marxist work on the theory of the novel, or more precisely theory of the cultural conditions of the novel, Georg Lukács writes on a world “without God”, a world where the foundations of creativity and invention are deprived of origin and meaning and direction.¹⁷ But not only that: the modern soul in general, Lukács states, reflecting, like Kracauer, Nietzsche’s image of the “death of God”, suffers from *transzendentale Heimatlosigkeit* (transcendental homelessness). It may long for totality – the epoch was characterised by a “hunger for wholeness”, writes Peter Gay¹⁸ – and that longing cannot be eradicated, but totality is

¹⁶ Kracauer, *Soziologie als Wissenschaft*, 9. The following quotations Kracauer, “Those who wait”, 135ff.

¹⁷ Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans*, 82. The following quotations 47, 52, 107. Cf. Berger & Berger & Kellner, *The Homeless Mind*. Kracauer reviewed Lukács’ book: “Georg von Lukács’ Romantheorie”.

¹⁸ Gay, *Weimar Culture. The Outsider as Insider*, 8.

no more possible and has been transformed into memory, into abstract conception or conceptual abstraction.

Weimar reality in all its anarchy was empty – or seemed not to exist at all. Gottfried Benn denotes reality as the true “daemonic notion of Europe”.¹⁹ Religious reality had vanished long ago, then science transformed reality into “relations and functions”, a disenchanted world of “utility”, of operationality, a reduced, reversed, perverted world without origin, aim, essence, the void of the present.

Robert Musil varies the critique of modernity as rationalisation and objectification. It is a prosaic age, he says, “the age of facts”, a world that has become a *Notersatz*, a “makeshift substitute”, ruled by the “trained vulgarity” of “ratioide” mankind.²⁰

Sociologically, Weber had presented the general formula for the modern age: “One can, in principle, *master* all things by *calculation*” – a statement indicating radical rationalisation as well as radical contingency and permanent crisis. And whether the subject of this “cultural development” or its consequence, and whether this development was a mere beginning or in fact a “last stage”: the contemporary human type was for Weber but a “specialist without spirit, sensualist without heart”, a “nullity”.²¹ This “last man” is the perpetrator behind the over-rationalised world as well as the

19 Benn, “Bekenntnis zum Expressionismus”, 265ff.

20 Musil, “The German as Symptom”, 176, 160, 182; “Mind and Experience”, 145.

21 Weber, “Science as a Vocation”, 139; *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 124.

death of God – the death of God *is* the through and through rationalised world.

In this critique, modernity's efforts to establish order and truth and progress are frantic substitutions for the experience of loss, for the loss of experience. They manifest a world where the state of emergency has become "rule", not exception, as Walter Benjamin writes, a world of "ontological state of emergency", in the words of Makropoulos.²² In Blumenberg's formulation: the "minimum of ontological disposition" is a "maximum of constructive potential".²³ And again, in the experience of Ernst Troeltsch: "rationalism" is the opposite and also the pendant to "contingency" – and it is the substitution for totalities, a pseudo-totality essentially reflecting a world deprived of meaning and coherence.²⁴

Abundance

Void and abundance, simultaneously – and minimal expression of modernity's abundant state, modernity as abundance. I will now bring forward some concepts and images of this experience.

Lukács, in his theory of the novel, emphasised the emptiness of modernity. He also stressed its "confused manifoldness"

22 Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt", 272; Makropoulos, *Modernität als ontologischer Ausnahmezustand*.

23 Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 251.

24 Troeltsch, "Kontingenzen", 778.

and “decisive lack of direction”, indeed no aspects among others but its “constitutive apriori”, that miserable foundation from which emerged the immediate social and psychological problem of modernity, namely, the “mutually conditional relation” between “the problematic individual” and “contingent world”.²⁵

Lukács’ formula appears to be the conceptual blueprint for Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*, which is not merely a novel but also an immense psychological and sociological essay on what man is and might be.

To Musil, abundance is the general feature of the modern world and of modern mankind – is indeed that which makes modernity modern, which makes it rich – but also that which has transformed Europe into a “Babylonian madhouse” and made it “helpless”.²⁶ Modernity, Musil states, emerges as an “undirected condition, a leftover abject confusion, like iron filings scattered in an unmagnetized field”. Everything exists simultaneously, next to each other, through each other, in each other in an “infinitely interwoven surface” of heterogeneous realities and possibilities. And, mirroring Lukács: “There’s no longer a whole man confronting a whole world, only a human something moving about in a general culture-medium”.²⁷

And then, on man himself, either a man without qualities or perhaps more typically, qualities without man, a proto-

25 Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans*, 53, 67.

26 Musil, “Helpless Europe”, 128.

27 Musil, “The German as Symptom”, 171–172; *The Man Without Qualities. Part I, II*, 709, 234.

definition of post-modern, post-autonomous man, Musil writes: man's essence is his form, and man's form is conferred on him by history – man *does* change in accordance with circumstances, but does not change *himself*. Man is "the quintessence of his possibilities", "potential man", something "malleable", "a liquid mass that has to be shaped". He emerges as a "substratum" whose good and evil range equally widely in him, like the pointer on a sensitive scale and consequently "human nature is as capable of cannibalism as it is of the *Critique of Pure Reason*". In brief, man is an *Ungestalt*, an amorphism, at disposal for himself and for others, for autonomy and heteronomy, for the beautiful and for the bloody.²⁸

Musil's description would fit in most of Georg Simmel's essays. The constitution of the world, Simmel says, is "relative", transformations are but "derivatives of other derivatives". And the sociologist's knowledge of the world is a "free-floating process" since "the world itself" "floats in the air".²⁹ Or rather: this is modern mankind's relation to the world. This view of Simmel would later lead to Karl Mannheim elaborating the sociology of knowledge as sub-discipline – a sub-discipline whose propositions today saturate any theory of knowledge.

Man's modern "essence", Simmel says, is a "crossing of countless social threads", an "intersection between the self and an unknown circle of injunctions". As modernity, that is,

28 Musil, *The Man Without Qualities. Part I, II*, 270, 391; "Nation' as Ideal and Reality", 114, 113; "und Nationalismus. Internationalismus", 1348. Cf. Vatan, *Robert Musil et la question anthropologique*.

29 Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes*, 100.

abundance, complexity, heterogeneity, is intensified, as is the case in the metropolis, that aggravated modernity, that modernity in nucleo, that special form of "promiscuity"³⁰, man reaches his "highest degree of nervous energy", stimulated to the verge of collapse.³¹ Urban life means the permanent setting about all contradictory, irreconcilable impulses, duties, aspirations and desires – means the lasting "transmutability", the "permanent fluctuation" between moving and changing conditions and accordingly "less a succession between Yes and No and more of their simultaneousness".³²

Musil's novelist colleague and competitor Joseph Roth, speaking about his own experiences as Eastern European and modern Jew alike, and certainly embodying the Simmelian "stranger" who permanently internalises and externalises paradoxes, aporias, passages, acclaimed to have suffered from *assimilitis* all his life. Roth was not capable of assimilation, that is, that "attempt to neutralise opposites which will still be present" and which are at the core of modern identities.³³ Accordingly, he remained "a Frenchman coming from the East, a humanist, a rationalist with religion, a Catholic with a Jewish brain".³⁴

Weber varied the idea, the experience of psychic hypertrophy which is typical for modern man. Modernity "besieges" man, he is but a function, a reflection of the

30 Gilloch, "Fragments, Cityscapes, Modernity. Kracauer on the Cannebière", 26.

31 Simmel, *Über soziale Differenzierung*, 241; "Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur", 404; "The Metropolis and Mental Life", 114.

32 Simmel, "Rodin".

33 Roth quoted in Bronsen, *Joseph Roth. Eine Biographie*, 358.

34 Roth quoted in Bronsen, *Joseph Roth. Eine Biographie*, 267.

steadily increasing and ever more complex realities in society.³⁵

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One could continue these conceptual variations and combinations on the critical state of man and of culture in classical modernity. But I will leave it there. What Paul Valéry calls "the epoch of the provisional", with is key feature of simultaneous "ubiquity" and essential absence, might be a useful point of reference when we want to interpret our own contemporary society.³⁶

Time has passed, culture is in a permanent state of "passage", as Ferdinand Tönnies emphasised, yet time in modernity might also be perceived of as a "sphere" that manifests both emergences and disappearances.³⁷

35 Weber, "Diskussionsrede zu W. Sombarts Vortrag über Technik und Kultur", 453.

36 Valéry quoted in Löwith, *Paul Valéry. Grundzüge seines philosophischen Denkens*, 95.

37 The image of time as sphere comes to my knowledge from composer Bernd Alois Zimmermann.

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