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Philosophy, Pop and Politics

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Josef Früchtl

And No End: Philosophy, Pop and Politics.

Abstract: The lecture is about the connection between philosophy, popular culture and politics. The trinity matters. For the generation born after the Second World War, this is evident not only on the level of subjective and cultural experience, but matters also on the level of philosophical thought itself. Hence, the relation between these three spheres is a multi-layered relation of coexistence, conflict and cooperation. The thought of Theodor W. Adorno offers a surprising and fitting example for this. The intertwined relationship between philosophy, pop and politics also returns when the question comes up: "how is it possible to change things?" An adequate answer, again, requires not only the perspective of practical politics and cultural-aesthetic creativity, but of philosophical ontology as well. In the end there is no final relationship between these spheres, and thus there is no ending in figuring out what makes "another world" possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Meneer de decaan,

Dear colleagues, companions and friends,

For quite some time it seemed that searching for a due date for this valedictory lecture would never come to an end. A pandemic of the extent we know for meanwhile more than one and a half years doesn't match with planning, i.e. a temporal order of actions in the future. But here we are finally. And here I go.

„Ending“

To begin with, a short clarifying reminder. We use the word "end" categorically in a temporal and spatial-local meaning. Temporally, we speak of the end of a story, the end of history, the end of life, and all this maybe gathered in a single song: „This is the end, beautiful friend / This is the end, my only friend, the end.“ (The Doors played that song about death as a friend always at the end of their concerts. It was the illuminating opening song of Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam epic *Apocalypse Now*.) Spatially and locally, we speak of the end of the street, of the light at the end of the tunnel (which can have a temporal meaning as well, like in our epidemic times), or we say that we are willing to follow someone until the end of the world. (In doing so, some of us may think of a Wim Wenders movie thematising the obsession for movies, actually for images, for photographs that can be projected directly into the human brain, and vice versa for visions that can be recorded – the great dream and nightmare of all computer nerds and

cinéastes.) And since there is – here as everywhere – an intermediate range between a temporal and spatial meaning, one also can take the liberty of saying foolish things like: “Alles hat ein Ende, nur die Wurst hat zwei.” (“Everything has an/one end, only the sausage has two.”)

A new work project

Talking about the end right now has a temporal, but thoroughly dedramatised meaning. For I am talking only on the occasion of the end of my academic career. In customary style I have three options for it. I can talk about my past work, the work I would like to do in the future, or what I am working on right now. I clearly prefer the last option. “Only the present is fresh, the rest”, the past, „pale and paler”, and the future – we may add - half-baked. That’s how I immediately hear one of the heroes of philosophy talking, Georg – in addition the imperial first names Wilhelm Friedrich – Hegel giving his lectures on fine art in the 1820s at the Humboldt university in Berlin.¹ For Hegel, this implies an elaborated theory on art, modernity and creativity. But in a simple manner he only points at the intrinsic connection between presence and urgency. What is present, always is urgent in the ontological sense that we cannot but immediately react to it; presence cannot wait.

So, what am I working on at the moment? I started working on a project that has accompanied me as a vague, again and again flashing up idea for a long time. Like an unknown friend. Like a permanent emissary from the past. Simply spoken, the project is about the connection between philosophy, popular culture and politics. And since we had to learn in the past decades that the humanities, too, have to follow the technological and capitalist law that time is money and shouldn’t be wasted by repeating long terms, I decided to call my project “PPP”. The trinity matters. The connection only between philosophy and politics is a widely discussed topic. This is true not only in the narrow sense that there is political philosophy as a subcategory of philosophy, but also in the wider and enduring sense that philosophy as such has a political self-understanding. This is a hallmark not only in the philosophical school I grew up in, the so-called Frankfurt School, but also in US-American philosophical pragmatism and in the variations of the newer French thought simply called “postmodern”. But for me and – as I may say in a generalising way – my generation (The Who offered us the respective song) the dimension of culture may not be separated from philosophy and politics.

¹ Hegel’s Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art, transl. by T.M. Knox, Vol. I, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988, p. 608.

At first, that connection was based on an evidence of experience. The German writer Stephan Wackwitz offers a fine example in his book *Neue Menschen* (2005) where he pursues autobiographically and halfway ironically the idea of the so-called ‘new man’ in its utopian and ghostly aspects. In spring 1977 – my second semester at the university of Frankfurt – the narrator decides to write his Master thesis on Hölderlin, and regards this as a political decision. The words of Diotima, the muse of Socrates, from Hölderlin’s epistolary novel *Hyperion*: “Du must wie der Lichtstrahl herab ...” (“You must, like the ray of light, descend ...”), sound like poetry of a muse of the revolution for the student of the 1970s. *Hyperion* is political philosophy in lyrical sentences. The book is about the birth and rebirth of the absolute in a fallen world. It is about – a dangerous connection - an onto-theological-political fusion. It is joined, finally, by popular culture in the shape of rock- and pop-music and film, in the case of film even in the shape of a scruffy and cynical figure: “Especially that *Wehrmacht* coat from the collection of second hand clothing cited the spaghetti westerns of which we couldn’t get enough back then.”²

Thus, the connection of philosophy, popular culture and politics for my generation is evident on the level of subjective and cultural experience. But this connection is present also on the level of philosophical thought itself. Historically, it is Jean-Jacques Rousseau who flags the entrance with his radical criticism of culture in the period of Enlightenment, and it is Friedrich Nietzsche who places emphasis on it for the second time, though in a period when enlightenment finally obtains a dark turn fascinated by the “sickness” of the bourgeois society. Systematically, it is not that easy to demonstrate the internal connection between philosophy, politics and popular culture. Such demonstrations are either trivial or require a lot of theory. Thus, as Hegelian one could localize the significance of philosophy within a general context, the “system of the spirit”. Philosophy in that context could be interpreted as a parallel to art and religion, and each of the dimensions as expression of an underlying principle. As critical theorist educated by Hegel and Marx one could redefine that principle in a historical-materialist way and interpret philosophical works as expression of a class society, the reified commodity form and so on. Following Max Weber or Talcott Parsons, however, one would have to accept the increasing social-cultural differentiation and conceive of the grand spheres of society, economy and culture as spheres which do have indirect influence on each other but are in quintessence autonomous.

² Stephan Wackwitz, *Neue Menschen. Bildungsroman*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 2005, p. 43 & 44.

What interests me, is a cultural history and analysis of philosophy after the Second World War against the background of a philosophical theory of modernity and subjectivity. Modernity, hence, is a multilayered phenomenon where diverse models of subjectivity compete with each other.³ To think about modernity means to think about the Self. But the Self isn't a firm unity, rather a relation to itself, more exactly: a relation of diverse epistemic forms, even more exactly: a dynamical relation of epistemic forms with the central ones being called cognitive, moral-ethical – and hence also political – and aesthetic forms. They can exist autonomously in parallel and express the same in a very different way; but they can contradict each other as well; or the emphasis between them can change so that first one of the forms and then another one is dominant; and finally, they can strengthen that cooperative relationship and build cross-connections, overlap and mutually intensify each other. From a philosophical view, modernity along with the underlying conception of subjectivity is a relationship of coexistence, conflict and cooperation (“ccc” we might say), a relationship which puts, on the one hand, the epistemic forms and the respective societal spheres (of science, morality, law, politics, economy, art), on the other hand, the developing diverse models of subjectivity, side by side, against each other or with each other. That multiple relationship consequently can be tracked also as to the relation between philosophy, popular culture and politics.

So, reconstructing the internal relation between philosophy, pop and politics means reconstructing a variable relation of coexistence, conflict and cooperation. Sometimes that relation is low-key and yet highly visible, unremarkable and yet obvious, as it is the case in Richard Rorty's philosophy of contingency, irony and solidarity, a theoretically elaborated expression of the US-American Left which resonates the folk songs from Woody Guthrie to Joan Baez. Sometimes the relation I am interested in delivers surprising interferences like the one of Stanley Cavell's philosophy of existential and anti-skeptical acknowledgement with the flower-power hymn of the Beatles “All you need is love”.

For the time being I will focus on another example presenting a philosopher who became famous for his vehement criticism on popular culture, or as he preferred to say: “culture industry”, but on the other hand became the teacher of a young generation that did not believe that

³ I have used that idea also in my book on *The Impertinent Self. A Heroic History of Modernity* (Stanford University Press 2009, German original with Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 2004). There I am analysing the three models of classical-Hegelian, agonal-romantic and hybrid-postmodern subjectivity, relating them furthermore to the film genres of the western, thriller and science fiction movie. I did not foreground the relational or intersubjectivistic model in the way it deserves.

“resistance” is only to be found in high culture, in Beethoven, Schönberg or Beckett. I am talking, of course, about Theodor W. Adorno, and I am talking about how he himself prepared to sing “Roll over Beethoven”.

Adorno and the message in a bottle

The anecdote is well-known, but I cannot avoid help it. It is said that during his time in exile, Adorno once stood on a beach in California surrounded by friends, among them Hanns Eisler, Marxist, student of Schönberg and later composer of the national anthem of the German Democratic Republic (without applying twelve-tone music in that case). When Adorno sighed that he would like to write down the quintessence of his thinking, put it into a bottle and throw it into the sea hoping that some day someone would find the bottle, Eisler seemed to have interrupted him by asking him mockingly: “And, Teddy, what will the message be, other than: ‘I feel so miserable’ (‘mir ist so mies’)”?⁴

Aside from being a telling anecdote, we must state that this topos of the message in a bottle is quite appropriate to Critical Theory as elaborated around Max Horkheimer. It cannot be denied that this theory loses its political faith in the labor movement after the middle of the 1930s, and recognises itself increasingly as an isolated group of intellectuals. Seen from a geopolitical perspective, this is all too understandable, since liberal democratic institutions vanish more and more in the 1920s and 30s, making room for what Horkheimer calls “the authoritarian state”.⁵

But retrospectively we can also state that by the 1960s, the message in a bottle has attained its goal in an initially slowly increasing but finally powerful wave. In those years, for a large part of Adorno’s readers, rock music, itself developing strongly at the time, was as important as the texts of the philosopher from Frankfurt. They learned that that you can do one thing – listening to the music of Beethoven – without giving up the other – dancing to the music of Chuck Berry (from 1956). For the students of Adorno there was no need for Beethoven to disappear. To “roll

⁴ This anecdote is spread among others by Leo Löwenthal, see W. Martin Lüdke: “Das utopische Motiv ist eingeklammert: Gespräch mit dem Literatursoziologen Leo Löwenthal“, in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 17.05.1980; published in English as: “The Utopian Motif in Suspension: A Conversation with Leo Löwenthal“ (in: *New German Critique* 38, Spring-Summer 1986, transl. by Ted R. Weeks); see also Leo Löwenthal, *Mitmachen wollte ich nie. Ein autobiographisches Gespräch mit Helmut Dubiel*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1980, p. 81; Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno. Ein letztes Genie*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 2003, p. 196, referring also to a letter of Horkheimer from 1940 where he describes the work of Critical Theory as “a kind of message in a bottle” (“eine Art Flaschenpost”).

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London: Michael Joseph 1994; Max Horkheimer, „Autoritärer Staat“ (1942), in: idem, *Gesellschaft im Übergang*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 1972, pp. 13-35.

over” only meant to give way to rock ‘n’ roll. It is not about running Beethoven over with a steamroller, but instead that he should demonstrate solidarity, and cast his lot with Chuck Berry so that in the end both can present their kind of music. Indeed, in the 1950s and 1960s – The Beatles spread the song even more – “Roll Over Beethoven” rightly sounds like an impertinent challenge to bourgeois culture.

The question I am asking myself is, how it became possible that Adorno’s message in a bottle attained its receivers. What are the social-cultural and epistemic conditions for Adorno’s success as an intellectual in the Federal Republic of Germany? My thesis is that this success is based on a phenomenon that Adorno himself diagnoses but does not analyse: the split consciousness of his audience. To my mind, it presents itself in four variations or models of Post-War subjectivity which alternate but also overlap. They can be roughly assigned to the four decennia from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Firstly, there is the bourgeois subject of post-war existentialism, “Adorno for *Ruinenkinder*”, as the German sociologist Heinz Bude tellingly calls it. He quotes the poet Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, born in 1940, writing about a childhood in the ruins and between shrapnel of World War II.⁶ The young generation growing up after the war in West Germany, over the years gets to know not only the conveniences of – as the dominant historiographic general outlines put it - Americanisation, liberalisation and democratization, but remain also exposed to the emotional burden described by the historian Frank Bieß in his book *Republik der Angst*. “Existential insecurity”, circling around the basic question of how to get through life day by day, and “massive fear” (of violent and sexual assaults by soldiers of the occupying powers, of confiscation of one’s possessions, or of denazification) form the fundamental experiences of many Germans in the years after the war.⁷

It is not difficult to find this mood portrayed in the literature of the time, in the “Trümmerliteratur” (rubble literature) represented in an exemplary way by Heinrich Böll and Wolfgang Borchert; in the tragicomic “absurd theater” of Samuel Beckett whose *Waiting For Godot* is premiered in 1953; or in the dramas of Friedrich Dürrenmatt whose *Besuch der alten Dame*

⁶ Heinz Bude, *Adorno für Ruinenkinder. Eine Geschichte von 1968*, München: Hanser 2018, p. 54; see also Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Granatsplitter. Eine Erzählung*, München: Hanser 2012.

⁷ Frank Bieß, *Republik der Angst. Eine andere Geschichte der Bundesrepublik*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 2019, p. 44, see also p. 19, 68-70, 158-159.

(*The Visit of the Old Lady*) is premiered in 1956 and was filmed three years later for German television; or in the poems of Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann and Gottfried Benn. The line could be extended.

Of course, the area of ‘low culture’ and entertainment is also interesting in this context. One could easily refer to the success of German *Schlager* music and the German-Austrian *Heimatfilme*. Doing this would carve out another hidden layer of existentialist despair. As to international cinema, this period and its feeling of existential homelessness (“Heimatlosigkeit”) is exemplarily framed by two movies: on the one hand by *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), a disillusioning lesson in social studies and civic virtue; and, on the other, by *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (Louis Malle, 1958), a gloomy and dreamy black-and-white film accompanied by the music of Miles Davis. Both refer to the *film noir* genre that had developed already in the 1940s.

At the time, Adorno is by no means an illustrious personality. Rather, he is – like jazz and existentialism – known only to “a swarm of esoterics” who read his books above all outside of the university, carrying them around like a “Handbrevier”.⁸ Indeed, “the dialectic of Adorno’s secret of success” also consists in his fascination for those connecting a deeply felt existentialist non-conformism with a bourgeois enthusiasm for culture; that is, for those people who do have a certain preference for grappling with poems rather than the global situation.⁹ Adorno’s whole point, his *clou*, consists in analyzing the global situation, concretely: in breaking the eloquent German silence regarding the recent past by calling on the realm of culture, i.e. on philosophy and art, as witness for the prosecution.

At this point, the first variant of that split of consciousness becomes noticeable that is able to explain Adorno’s success, not only on the cultural-historical and -sociological level, but also on the level of the epistemic. In line with the idealist tradition, which is of course a very distinct one in Germany, culture on the one hand appears as a high value with a lot of emotional resonance; on the other hand, there is a non-conciliatory ‘going against the grain’ practiced by

⁸ Bude, *Adorno für Ruinenkinder*, l.c., p. 84 (my transl.); see also: Philipp Felsch, *Der lange Sommer der Theorie. Geschichte einer Revolte: 1960-1990*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 2016, p. 28, referring also to Michael Rutschky, „Erinnerungen an die Gesellschaftskritik“, in: *Merkur* Nr. 423 (1984), p. 28; see also Stefan Müller-Doohm, „Denkerfahrten. Oder: Wer war Adorno für uns?“, in: idem, (ed.), *Adorno-Portraits. Erinnerungen von Zeitgenossen*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2007, p. 101 (Adornos writings, following Hans Magnus Enzensberger, as hand luggage, „Handgepäck“) u. 107 (Adorno as „Randerscheinung“ in the 1950s, as someone on the fringes).

⁹ Felsch, *Der lange Sommer der Theorie*, l.c., p. 32 (my transl.).

the critical theorist. The respective consciousness proves itself as split between affective occupation and theoretical distance. Expressing itself anticipatorily in English, it states: ‘I know, it’s only culture, the so-called higher realm of spirit, but it’s also more than that, and it is because of that ambivalence that I like it.’

This split appears in a new guise in the 1960s with rock music. At the same time, it offers – secondly – a stage for the model of subjectivity that becomes the dominant one in those years: the hedonist-rebellious subject. The musical leap into the new decade and a new dimension of rock and pop music can be dated to the year 1963. It is the year that The Beatles shout out their “She Loves You”. The raid-like “yeah, yeah, yeah” is born. The loud and swinging song expresses exactly the societal feeling The Beatles initially stand for: an ironic and corrupted affirmation, the spoofed “yes” to everything that there is. There is no better music to express the impertinent juvenile fun of the 1960s.¹⁰

From then on things take off. In the years between 1963 and 1970 revolutionises at breakneck speed, with one new band following another, and one new sound creating yet another one. That music, indeed, triggers a cultural revolution across nations and classes, a transformation of the forms of life, focusing on the postmaterialist values of freedom and self-realisation.¹¹ Thus, at this time, not only “the hour of theory” has arrived - with its booming paperback series - but also the hour of emotional liberation as expressed in in rock music. The discourse of theory, with its flourishing and sensuous-colourful paperback series (of *edition suhrkamp*), helps Critical Theory to gain unimagined success, and substitutes the category of existence from the 1950s with the category of society, making of West-Germany something like the “Bundesrepublik Adorno”.¹²

It is well known that Adorno is much less appreciative of the expressive dimension of protest than he is of the theoretical and explicitly political dimension. He has serious reasons for that. But in the new context, too, he addresses the split of consciousness. In his article „Culture

¹⁰ See Peter Wicke, *Von Mozart zu Madonna. Eine Kulturgeschichte der Popmusik*, Leipzig: Kiepenheuer 1998, p. 253 & 254.

¹¹ See Kaspar Maase, *Grenzenloses Vergnügen. Der Aufstieg der Massenkultur 1850-1970*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, pp. 235; as to postmaterialism see Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977; see also Diederich Diederichsen, *Der lange Weg nach Mitte. Der Sound und die Stadt*, Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1999, p. 275: Diederichsen calls the heyday of rock music „Pop 1“, the heroic phase of subversion and anti-culture, whereas at latest since the 1980s „Pop 2“ is busy only with consuming the discharged ideals of the past.

¹² Felsch, *Der lange Sommer der Theorie*, l.c., p. 21 & 23; see Bude, *Adorno für Ruinenkinder*, l.c., p. 67, 78-79.

Industry Reconsidered” from 1963 he writes: “It may also be supposed that the consciousness of the consumers themselves is split the prescribed fun which is supplied to them by the culture industry and a not particularly well-hidden doubt about its blessings.”¹³ So, the rebelling students know about the contradiction they themselves incorporate. To express it simply via a refrain from the Rolling Stones (from 1974): „I know it’s only rock ’n’ roll, but I like it”. I *know* – so the critical young consciousness says - it’s only rock ‘n’ roll, but I like it because it expresses what I – together with a lot of other people – feel. It is – using noble Hegelian terms - a form of cultural self-assurance or sensuous self-reflection. Against this epistemic background, Adorno’s success appears as an expression of intellectual schizophrenia.

It is this varied split of consciousness that explains Adorno’s success and the ambivalent discourse around popular culture. To a certain degree it also characterises the two subsequent variations of subjectivity in post-war Germany and even in the so-called Western world in general: the neoromantic subject of the 1970s and the postmodern, i.e. aesthetic-neoliberal subject of the 1980s and beyond. I will confine myself to a short note. Hence, the subject of the post-68 period takes up a thread of the 1950s again, in its strolling cool jazz version as well as in its existentialist shape, which enters the societal and pop-cultural stage in the shape of the punk rebel, but accompanies it in a contrasting way by the eco-rebel, who continues the hippie movement in the form of sociopolitical commitment. In the 1980s this neoromantic model of subjectivity transforms itself definitively into an aesthetic coolness that has as its flipside nothing but the subject of neoliberalism making itself an entrepreneur of itself.¹⁴ Adorno’s message in a bottle in that way is received productively in a multiple way. “Message in a bottle”, a cult song of The Police from 1979, insofar appears as a timely answer to Adorno that introduces a twist, a surprising turn, in any case musical drive into the split consciousness.

Ontology, or: on what there is (becoming)

The relation between the three spheres of philosophy, popular culture and politics – so I’ve said – in general is a relation of coexistence, conflict and cooperation. And I made use of Adorno to illuminate a first example for that threefold relationship. Now, I can give my presentation a

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered”, in: idem, *The Culture Industry. Selected essays on mass culture*, edited and with an introduction by J.M. Bernstein, London and New York: Routledge, 200, p. 103.

¹⁴ As to the concept of coolness see the introduction by Annette Geiger, Gerald Schröder & Anne Söll, in: idem (eds.), *Coolness. Zur Ästhetik einer kulturellen Strategie und Attitüde*, Bielefeld: transcript 2010, pp. 7-16; see also the contribution of Gabriele Mentges, „Coolness – Zur Karriere eines Begriffs“, pp. 17-35; as to the connection between aesthetics and neoliberalism see Michel Foucault, *Die Geburt der Biopolitik. Geschichte der Gouvernementalität, Vol. 2, Vorlesung am College de France 1978-1979*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 2006, p. 314.

more classical philosophical turn by saying that in principle Adorno's theory, and the way it was incorporated by his students, circles around the question: How is change possible? What makes it possible to change things? In trying to answer that question, it is not sufficient to refer to only two elements of our threefold relationship. Referring to practical politics and cultural-aesthetic creativity is not enough. It may seem enough as long as we talk about changing a certain society, or a way of life, but our new question is concerned with *change as such*. An answer in that case needs philosophical ontology.

Ontology tries to answer the very general question of what characterizes being in itself, or which characteristics we need to call something "being". Traditionally, it is linked to the concept of identity, speaking with Heidegger: Being is conceptualized as existent. For saying that something "is", means that we are able to identify something as to its general and necessary characteristics. Thus, the counter-concept of identity, namely "difference", right from the beginning is only of secondary significance. And since there can't be change without stating difference, the concept and idea of change as well is of secondary significance. Philosophical ontology that is interested in an independent explanation of change, therefore must change the asymmetry of significance – by putting both sides on an equal level, or by turning the asymmetry around and privileging difference above identity. In any way it has to deal with what isn't identifiable: the "non-identical", as Adorno calls it. Such a theoretical endeavor has to be aware of two difficulties: Firstly, it is always exposed to the risks of paradoxical thought, because the theorist has to use concepts, and using concepts makes sense only, if they give unity or identity to something, in that case the identity of the non-identical. Secondly, an ontology of the non-identical (Adorno) or of Being with a capital B (Heidegger), has to come up with the thesis that, what can be identified is (only) an update, a representation, a mode, or an appearance of something else, in classical terms: of what there truly is, in anti-hierarchical and insofar anti-metaphysical terms: of what is more than what can be identified at any one time. Spinoza calls that sphere of being "God or nature", Hegel calls it "(movement of) the concept", Schopenhauer "will", Deleuze "the virtual". They almost all agree in one point, namely that being in its essence is "becoming", an infinite process of originating and passing by, of making through distinguishing, creating through differentiating. On the side of science – not to forget - that kind of ontology is supported by diverse theories, most prominently by quantum physics arguing that what we call "things" are essentially nothing but (longer lasting) happenings; that, for

example, a stone is nothing but an interplay of forces, a swing of quantum fields.¹⁵ In biology the research community starts to think of the body not as an encapsulated unity but as coaction of human and bacterial cells, as part of a “meta-organism”.¹⁶

This is the level that has to be reached in looking for an ontological explanation of change. Some philosophers try to unfold an internal structure in the process of being. For Hegel it is the structure of dialectical progress. For diverse reasons, however, this structure is not convincing any longer. One reason for this is that the opposing theory within the frame of historicity may be seen likewise as, at least partly, convincing. In that case, following Nietzsche, Heidegger and Horkheimer/Adorno, history turns out to be in a permanent decline. Thus, in a next step one may think that the theoretic model outside the historical frame offers a better alternative. It is the messianic model that tells us that we should be prepared for the arrival of the Messiah who may enter the floor at any moment in time. Following that model – Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard seem to have an affinity for it -, everything is possible at every moment. The reason, again, that this model isn’t convincing is an ontological one. For the thesis that everything is equally possible at every moment, presupposes that in principle everything already “is there”. It’s the ontology we know from Plato and modified from Aristotle. Both are not able to conceptualize “the new”, newness as such. (I am following Hans Blumenberg’s interpretation.) Aristotle seems to be better in that, but though he offers a dynamic concept of being and nature emphasizing it as a productive principle, as *natura naturans* instead of *natura naturata*, he seems to think of being as eternal self-repetition. For him “the possible is only what is already a reality in terms of its Form.”¹⁷

So, what remains as a convincing alternative to the (progressive and regressive) historical and ahistorical (messianic) models of being, is the model of *ontological contingency* as it is suggested by philosophical pragmatism including John Dewey and Richard Rorty. (And in that context also Deleuze is a pragmatist.) Following these philosophers, we “may not say that *anything can happen*, but that *so much* can happen we do not know about.”¹⁸ We also may not say

¹⁵ Cf. Carlo Rovelli, *Die Ordnung der Zeit*, transl. from Italian by Enrico Heinemann, Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt 2018, p. 85.

¹⁶ See Tobias Rees, Thomas Bosch & Angela E. Douglas, “How the microbiome challenges our concept of self”, *PLOS Biology*, 2018 (<https://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.2005358>.)

¹⁷ Hans Blumenberg, „Imitation of Nature: Toward a Prehistory of the Idea of the Creative Being”, in: *Qui Parle*, Spring/Summer 2000, Vol. 12, No. 1, published by Duke University Press, p. 30.

¹⁸ Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze. An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press 2005, p. 115-116; as to Dewey see his *Die Suche nach Gewissheit, Eine Untersuchung des Verhältnisses von Erkenntnis und Handeln*, Frankfurt/M. 1988, p. 10, 23, 37, 249 (American original: *The Quest for Certainty. Gifford Lectures 1928-29*); as to Rorty see

that something *necessarily* must happen, because there is always an element of chance. There are things that are logically impossible; something can't be a circle and a square at the same time. But given that narrow formal restriction, we call "contingent" what is neither necessary nor impossible. Everything could also be different.¹⁹ Contingency means that there is another - at least one other - possibility (of action and reality). So, in principle – as long as we are acting creatures, and acting means taking a decision between alternatives in a world we cannot completely control - there is always an alternative. The political slogan we had to listen to throughout the past decades, from Margaret Thatcher via Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder to Angela Merkel: "There Is No Alternative" – nicely called the TINA principle –, thus, from an ontological perspective is fundamentally wrong.

In contrast, pop culture is definitely wiser. „To every thing – turn, turn, turn / There is a season – turn, turn, turn / And a time to every purpose under heaven.” The Byrds presented that song in 1965 as a cover version of a song written by Pete Seeger in 1950. I don't want to say that it is a perfect expression of ontological contingency. The religious background cannot be missed and becomes even more evident once we realise that Seeger has borrowed parts of the text from the Old Testament.²⁰ But the song that tells us that there is a (right) time for everything, for laughing and crying, for fighting and hanging around, is pretty close to what I mean by ontological contingency, the relaxed confidence that there is no strict necessity in events; that they can turn out in one way or in another way; and that we must be able to jump at the chance and realise the right time for us.

Thus, there is a good ontological reason for philosophers, artists and "revolutionary" scientists (Thomas Kuhn) to make what seems to be impossible possible, whereas politicians and the

his *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Cambridge University Press 1989, p. 22: We should "try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi-divinity, where we treat *everything* – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance." - In contrast to the pragmatist concept of radical contingency see Quentin Meillassoux' speculative-materialist concept in: *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, London/New York 2008: "There is no reason for anything to be or to remain thus and so rather than otherwise ... Everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws" (p. 53); the absolute, insofar, is an acausal, anarchic, and contingent universe; see my critical article: Josef Früchtel, „Aesthetic-philosophical Realism: How Intuition Matters For Ontology and Cinema“, in: Christine Reeh / José Manuel Martins (Hg.), *Thinking Reality and Time Through Film*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2017, pp. 180-197.

¹⁹ Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen der Moderne*, Opladen 1992, S. 7; vgl. Michael Makropoulos, *Modernität und Kontingenz*, München 1997, bes. S. 13-32.

²⁰ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn!_Turn!_Turn!

powers that be mostly are busy to make what is possible impossible.²¹ Finally, coming back to my PPP principle I may say that there is no final relationship between the spheres of philosophy, popular culture and politics, no final determination, as well, between the three relationships of coexistence, conflict and cooperation. Thus, there is no ending in describing “the possible”, in figuring out what makes "another world", and another university, possible.

There was a moment in the recent years at the University of Amsterdam – in 2015 when the *Maagdenhuis* was occupied and transformed to a kind of free university - where such another university really seemed to be possible. A moment of eruption and disruption, of wonder and joy. It was almost unbelievable to see how much energy, ideas and creative power had slumbered under the daily routines of academic life with all its paralyzing and suffocating technical rules and its explicit market-driven imperatives of efficiency and competition. The energy had slumbered under the surface like the power of a preconscious will, the power of becoming under the encrusted layer of being.

Acknowledgements

And here I’ve reached the final part of my talk, the part where I want to say “Thank you”. Thank you to the companions of ReThink-UvA and the students of Humanities Rally. Thank you to the students who made my classes a space of intellectual “good vibrations”. It is a pity that many of them cannot be physically present today. Thank you to my former PhD students who gave me the opportunity to learn about new ways of thinking. Thank you to my colleagues at the department and the faculty who worked with me in a cooperative way. I enjoyed to be a member of a department so keen to debate and even rebellious like ours. Above all, thank you to those colleagues who worked with me for quite some time in PhD seminars, supervisions and interdisciplinary courses. Thank you also to friends and colleagues from Münster and Frankfurt, my former university towns. Ich schätze es sehr, dass ihr mir die Freude und die Ehre gemacht habt, bei meiner Abschiedsvorlesung dabei zu sein. Danke schließlich auch an meine – im doppelten Sinn des Wortes – „alten Freunde“ aus der Schulzeit in Bayern. Es ist schön, dass ihr – nochmal im doppelten Sinn des Wortes – „da seid“. Last, but certainly not least: Natalie who never tires in fighting the battle of the sexes with me, but of course in *Adam’s Rib*

²¹ This is a variation of a sentence by Bertrand Russell: “Scientists strive to make the impossible possible, politicians to make the possible impossible.” See <https://exploringyourmind.com/bertrand-russell-five-phrases-to-think-about/>

(1949, with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy) we do have a great cinematic model.

Now, there's only one thing to be done, and Joe Cocker will help me with a well-known song: "Baby, take off your coat ... real slow / Baby, take off your shoes ... here, I'll take your shoes / Baby, take off your dress ... yes, yes, yes / You can leave your hat on / You can leave your hat on / You can leave your hat on." (And while Joe Cocker gives a presentation of that song via a Youtube click, I am taking off my black gown, my cap and the white collar to finally put my hat – my trusty old leather hat – on.)

Ik heb gezegd.