

# THE CONTINGENT SOCIETY

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## AND THE NEED FOR UTOPIA

An essay by Anil K. Jain

Swimming in the endless sea of possibility. Drifting along the flow of diversity. Watching the dance of accidents. Making avail of the opportunities of life. Playing with the scope of offers. Revelling in chance. Is this the art of contingency?

The other side: shrinking back from unpredictability. Being crushed by the load of options. Suffocating from the multiplicity of choices. Experiencing paralysis through the amount of alternatives. Drowning in the ocean of decision-making. Bursting from the uncertainty of eventuality. Is that the abyss of contingency?

Contingency, anyhow, is the signature of the age. And Utopia, again, is the signature of contingency. The possible is in a close relation to the impossible. Furthermore: it is precisely the impossible that produces possibility, whereas the possible bears and hides the impossible. We live in the regime of the possibility: the contingent society.

In order to overcome this despotism of possibility – which is, in fact, the factual – in the name of the hidden (im-)possibilities, we ought to approach the space of contingency. But this requires a *different* concept of contingency.

## THE SURFACE OF CONTINGENCY

On the level of phenomena the observers of society have noticed an increase of polymorphism, of indeterminacy, of apparent arbitrariness and of inherent contradiction (see e.g. Hassan 1985). Especially the element of indeterminacy is a challenge for the delimitating game of science. Accordingly, the blurred contours of the contingent society are focussed and thus confirmed by penetrating efforts of terminological enclosure. The employed terms targets at the conceptual (and that is always also a metaphorical) representation of the sphere of phenomena. The fuzziness of conditions is hence expressed in fuzzy terms: nothing is constant, everything becomes fluid and so become the metaphors: even the »Liquid Modernity« (Bauman 2000) cannot escape from »theoretical compression« (see for this concept Jain 2002). Also the multiplicity of life-conditions and social patterns is mirrored – in the multitude of current concepts (see in an overview Pongs 1999 und 2000). Because of the quantity and the diversity of concepts for the contingent society one could suspect that the terms themselves have contingent character – in the sense of arbitrariness. But in respect of their purpose it is a *necessary* arbitrariness, since all common approaches to the phenomenon of contingency in the social sphere aim at the mimicking of the perceived surface of contingency instead of dealing with the character of contingency itself – which means, in fact, a veiling of the »nature« of the contingency of social conditions.

This also explains why even critical approaches cannot reach to a really satisfying framing of the problem of contingency in society. All efforts rest in the sphere of labelling, since having a label or name creates the illusion of power and control over the labelled object. This is the secret of the power of science. But science becomes a victim of its own magic. The impossible (Utopia) – which is the horizon in front of which possibility may appear – is hidden behind the expressions of the possible (and its revelations and threats). Thus, all the inflationary metaphors of the possible share a concept of contingency that has to be revealed and deconstructed in order to unfold the *other space* of contingency.

This common concept of contingency, which was adopted from classic philosophy, is quite simple in its basic traits: everything that is, but is not necessarily as it is, is contingent. Transferred to social sphere, this idea of contingency primarily means the increased openness of social structures and the loosened liability of social relations. However, it is possible to position oneself in different ways to this »social meaning« of contingency:

One can simply presuppose the contingent character of modern society (see e.g. Luhmann 1992). One can welcome the increase of possibilities as a relief from the constraints of necessity (see e.g. Gross 1994). One can hold a critical view which emphasises the individually charging moment of unreliability and constant change – as a demand for flexibility – in the contingent society (see e.g. Sennett 1998) and lament about the loss of shared values (see e.g. MacIntyre 1981). One can also take an ambivalent position which contrasts the increase of options with the weakening of ligatures (see e.g. Dahrendorf 1979). Or one can dismantle the talk about the increase of freedom and choice in society as a mere ideology (see e.g. Marcuse 1967).

Except from this last view – which explicitly denies the increase of real possibilities – all the listed approaches share a basic problem: they cannot explain how a social reality is created from possibility which is not merely arbitrary and freely re-shapable but, in fact, in a certain sense indeed hardened and compulsive. Formulations like »forced to be free« (Beck 1986 in reference to Rousseau) express this dilemma. And even ideology critique insofar stays caught in the space of convention as it does not question the underlying image of contingency as mere possibility, but just attacks the discrepancy between possibility, social self-description and reality. Therefore, a different view on the field of contingency is necessary.

## **A PRELIMINARY (NEGATIVE) APPROACH TO THE SPACE OF CONTINGENCY**

Initially, I want to understand contingency – very materially – as a space: the space of possibility. The character of space is emptiness. Another term for emptiness is void. The nothing and infinity: the dialectics of space. But in order to be accessible, a (concrete) space must emerge from both the nothing and from infinity, ie it has to *delimitate*. The limit or border makes abstract space real(isable). Maybe, reality is nothing but a limit in space.

However, how shall we actually imagine the relation of possibility to space and, foremost, to reality? Let us, for this purpose, involve in the game of philosophy: possibility is a space in-between.

The possible is, which is inherent in the term, neither impossible nor real, since, strictly speaking, what is (already) real can no more be possible. It is *realised* possibility. In this respect, the term possibility is by necessity coupled with an imagination of temporality. Possibility is not-yet-reality (and, perhaps, never-reality). In spite of this, the relation of possibility and reality is not exclusively marked by temporality. If it were like this, possibility could be equated to necessity. But unlike the mandatory point of necessity, possibility represents a larger *space* of potential reality which – sometime and somehow – crystallises to actuality: by the realisation of a possibility we face a *punctualisation of contingency*. The space of contingency shrinks to *one* point, *one* possibility, which, by its realisation, renders all other possibilities impossible or, at least, »unreal«. Accordingly, reality is a spatial demarcation of possibility which occurs through temporality.

Nonetheless, still we do not have an answer to the question of how the basically open and abstract space of possibility can give birth to the concreteness of reality. Paradoxically, for this problem, the impossible is the point of reference (and solution), since the impossible is, already according to what it literally means, the (negatively) delimiting and (positively) conditioning frame of the possible. Only with this framing possibility emerges from the surrounding impossibility, only through the delimitation by the impossible it becomes an »actual« possibility. Impossibility, as the other of the possible, is thus a condition of possibility – and, finally, reality. Hence, also the non-space of Utopia, which represents the impossible in the sphere of imagination, relates to reality in a *conditional and enabling* way. But for the moment it is sufficient to notice that the character of contingency points as well to possibility as to its limits. In this sense, *the contingent society is a limited society* – maybe even a society limited by itself and caught in itself, not really able to enter nor to expand the (utopian) space of contingency provided by the impossible.

## THE PROBLEM OF TEMPORALITY

The introduced view of a conditional relationship between the impossible, the possible and actuality, however, includes two problematic assumptions: the assumption of temporality and the assumption of a space of possibility, ie in fact the question how the singularity of reality is evolving from a plurality of possibilities. The problem of temporality is unsolvable as it is a problem of perspective: I cannot, we cannot imagine a world without temporality. Time is an immanent element of our experience. This is why Kant, in his »*Critique of Reason*« (1781), conceptualised time (and space) as a priori given elements of perception. However, not even its a priori character assures that temporality – and causality (which relies on temporality) – can withstand our own logic. Nagarjuna, the great »deconstructivist« of ancient India, succeeds in his »*Mulamadhyamakakarika*« to shake our common view on time in just a few lines: »If the present and the future/Depend on the past/Then the present and the future/Would have existed in the past [...]/If they are not depending on the past/Neither of the two would be established [...] /By the same method/The other two divisions – past and future/[...] should be understood/[...] So how can time exist?« (Ch. 19)

Following this argumentation time proves to be a mere conventional category, which is rather »practically« effective than transcendently true. So if we try – even if it might not be possible – to get rid of the idea of temporality, it then appears that the difference between reality and possibility is levelled: that which is real, is possible. But also: that which is possible, is real.

## REALISATION AND THE PROBLEM OF JUSTICE

Perceived in this way, the sphere of possibility, contingency, loses any moment of arbitrariness but becomes a dimension of reality. On the other hand, the dimensions of reality, which are given by possibility, are not easy to access. Imprisoned in temporality, possibility can only be experienced as reality, and this is why possibility seeks realisation in time. Within the conceptual frame of linear time this means: in the future. Within the conceptual frame of a cyclic time (as it is eg present in Indian culture) this means: in the future, in the past, or, in another cycle. This, however, makes us return to the second problem: how does exactly one distinct reality emerge from the space of possibility? And connected to this question: what does this mean for all those possibilities which did not or will not become real? A common, however unsatisfactory answer to the first question is the moment of chance or random. This answer is unsatisfactory since, logically, chance or random take the (empty) place of an unknown determiner in the chain of argumentation. The problem is thus just shifted and not solved. A different solution – which is, however, only imaginable in the conceptual frame of cyclic time – is to suppose that every possibility will realise within the pass of various cycles. The problem of this argumentation is not primarily a logical one, but that it does not really satisfyingly address the ethical dimension which was raised by the second question. As explained, in the (temporal) »effectivity« of reality, the space of possibility shrinks to one point; all other possibilities are thus eliminated, injustice is done to their potential reality. This injustice is cancelled out by the imagination of the cyclic time and its alternative lines of actuality. But being trapped in our cycle, how can we ever be sure that all possibilities are realised? We cannot. But we can express our discomfort and make clear that we are not willing to be betrayed and deprived of our possibilities by time and its cycles. The same problem, but even more pronounced, applies to the linear time model with its correspondent assumption of a realisation of possibility in the future, since in the progress of time certain possibilities are excluded from any realisation as they are no more linkable to the linear causal chain.

How can this dilemma of realisation be resolved? At first, a rather descriptive and approximate answer can be given to the first question, which is, however, also instructive in regard to the second problem. In the social sphere, realisation obviously occurs through action(s), and action is thus the media of punctualisation of contingency in the social real. Mostly, action is conceptualised as an expression of the free will of the individual. However, to presuppose a freedom of will (and thus action) would mean nothing else but the transfer of the principle of random or chance to the sphere of action. Since what else can be called freedom than the chance that one's own

will is in accordance with the forces that determine and drive us? Therefore, I would rather like to assume that we are *conditioned* by possibility. One cannot escape from this determination through possibility, and, unfortunately, each action results in an injustice to all possibilities which were or will not be realised through the course of this action. But any reality and any action also creates new possibilities, opens up new spaces of contingency, so that, along with the punctualisation of contingency in the process of realisation, a depunctualisation of contingency occurs: we are facing a dialectics of *punctualisation and depunctualisation*. Thus, taking action is not only justified, but necessary in order to create new spaces of contingency and action. One may even like to subscribe to the rule that any action shall further extend the contingent space of action. The injustice of reality is inevitable, but we also cannot avoid the obligation through possibility. And this obligation especially concerns the contingent society.

## FINAL TURN: THE LIMITATION OF THE CONTINGENT SOCIETY AND THE NEED FOR UTOPIA

The contingent society points us – theoretically and through our experience – to possibility *and its (outer) limits*. As carried out: contingency always means limitation, since possibility emerges only from its background and border-line. But this border is not arbitrary: the impossible is the frame. And the task. The horizon shall be – Utopia: the sphere of imagination which belongs to the impossible but creates possibility. Yet, the possibility of Utopia hardly appears in the reality of the contingent society, and the illusion, the ideology that everything is possible in fact and effectively obstructs (our) possibilities. Baudrillard (1990: p. 71) states: »heaven has come down the earth, the heaven of utopia«. But with the horizon of Utopia melting into the factual any possibility for becoming a *different* society is eliminated, and especially for the contingent society, the horizon of Utopia is in fact a necessity in order not to solidify, in order to unfold its contingent character as a real potential and not as a mere ideology.

There is a greater truth than the truth of the factual, and that is the reality of possibility. We are obliged to this reality.

Taking a decision instead of becoming intoxicated by the fiction of unlimited possibilities.  
Not betraying the present to the promises of the future, and not betraying the possible to the factual.

Resisting the attraction of feasibility for the possibility of *another* possibility.

Realizing the illusions of reality through self-confident distrust.

Unmasking the compulsions of the contingent society.

Maintaining utopian stubbornness in order to escape from the deformation of flexibility.

Escaping from consequence by imagination.

Not surrendering the possible to the real.

Setting limits in order to produce possibility.

Living the conflict.

Conflicting with the dictatorship of the factual.

In devotion to Utopia, since it is the only reality which is effective.

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