

## EDITORIAL

# CONTINGENCY IN POLITICAL THEORY

Today it is almost fashionable to speak of contingency in political theory, philosophy and historiography<sup>1</sup>. This fashion is, however, a novel phenomenon. In the sixties and seventies the sociological jargon of structures, functions, processes etc., with its implication of “necessities”, was dominant. This jargon still shapes much of the journalistic or administrative discourse and is visible for example in the common lamentations of the dangers of globalization. When John Pocock in *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) summarized the experience of certain Anglophone historians by expressing the idea of politics to consist in the “dealing with the contingent event”, he probably was more innovative than he himself understood. The recent contributions to contingency of politics could be related to this formula.

Why is contingency so fashionable today? It would not make any sense of “explaining away” it by some external “factors”. The point is, rather, that the idea of contingency is so multi-faceted that almost everyone can recourse to some of its faces to one’s own purposes.

Let us simply enumerate some of its facets, in an attempt to translate it. One is the simple facticity, something that “is” but has no grounds or reasons for being, like the Sartrean *être-en-soi*. Another

point is marked when contingency is identified as lack of foundations or sufficient grounds. A third nuance is the pure hazard or coincidence. This is to be distinguished from the good or bad luck, as an expression of the powers of the *fortuna*. Contingency sometimes also refers to a point of connection or “touch” as Oakeshott put it. Per definitionem contingent is “something that could be otherwise”. For political theory the most interesting variant of it is: “something that can be done otherwise”. In this sense contingency refers to occasion, opportunity or *Chance* in the Weberian sense. It simultaneously contains elements of revisability, mutability, alterability etc. The converse side of these aspects are the nuances of being timely, fragile, destructible, bound to failure or decay etc. In relation to time contingency is always something unexpected and unpredictable, something impossible to control.

What makes the concept so fashionable and fascinating is just its multiplicity of nuances, which tend to make tacit shifts, when we talk on contingency in a specific context. Indeed, contingency is a paradigmatic expression of the Koselleckian idea that concepts as such are ambiguous and contestable. In the controversy surrounding contingency, we can distinguish important disagreements concerning the concept itself from those on the value or acceptability of contingency, as well as from those concerning its significance in the situation or in historical changes.

How then to “deal with”, or better yet, to “play with” contingency? Contingency used to be a *bête noire* of the philosophers, and they only knew how to play *against contingency*, by denying its reality or significance, or by trying to eliminate or eradicate it. In the contemporary debate an acknowledgement of the reality and importance contingency is obvious, and its sheer elimination would appear to be something beyond human powers. This mere acknowledgement has, however, made possible new forms of reducing or “taming” contingency. It can be marginalized in its significance, reduced in its extent, restricted to specific fields of topics, normalized into something harmless, functionalized into service of proper aims, regulated into something controllable and so on.

Elections are “the contingent event” *par excellence* in the daily politics: a source of chances, choices and alternances. Around the elections, however, most of the aforementioned strategies of taming con-

tingency are actively used in various combinations, thus leaving the individual voter with little to choose from. It is no wonder that the topic of *Politikversdrossenheit* is a commonplace in the daily political discourse in the Western world.

The rehabilitation of politics seems, thus, to revalorize contingency. But how can we celebrate contingency? Rorty's reversal of the classical slogan into "freedom is the recognition of contingency" does not quite seem sufficient. Simply recognizing contingency does not prevent its taming. Contingency requires a reappraisal of the activity of politicking, as something more important than the substantive policy goals or procedural regulations of the polity. The results of political games should be left open, to be understood as the result of clever playing and of *fortuna* in relations to other players.

Still, it seems that it is difficult to speak of contingency without at least implicitly engaging in its reduction. How, then, can we conceptualize contingency without, through this very act, already taming it? The possibility of doing so consists, to borrow Quentin Skinner's terminology, in a rhetorical redescription of the concept, which alters its "range of reference". Only then could contingency appear as a politicizing move.

In Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment* the contingency of *fortuna*, in whichever form it was evoked, remained an already existing contingency, a background of all human actions, to which individuals only had to adapt themselves. The fashionable slogan of contingency in the contemporary discussion still seems to assume that the only contingency is that of the *fortuna*.

In the twentieth century political theory, however, we, at least implicitly, know, however, another figure of contingency, which is perhaps best manifested in the Weberian concept of *Chance*. For Weber *Chance* is an operative concept, which makes human actions and their relations to each other intelligible. In the Weberian sense, *Chance* marks an occasion or an opportunity, not in the rare and extraordinary sense of the Greek *kairos* or the Machiavellian *occasione*, but rather, as something omnipresent. For Weber even the extremely tight and bureaucratized structures and processes are to be made intelligible in the nominalistic terms of the complexes of *Chancen*.

A precondition of the rethinking of contingency in terms of *Chancen* was, in the 'Weberian moment' a situational analysis according to

which *fortuna* had vanished. Weber saw the tendency towards bureaucratization as omnipresent and irresistible, a force which probably would “one day” extinguish the moments of freedom. His reconceptualization of the contingency of politics in terms of *Chancen* was a move to restrict the tendency of bureaucratization. Weber overestimated the role of bureaucratization, while there are signs of a return of the *fortuna* in the contemporary world. Weber’s concept of *Chance* remains a key innovation for the contemporary political theory, but the return of the *fortuna*, as it is manifested by actualization several figures, such as Beck’s concept of risk, in obliges us again to rethink the contingency of politics.

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In this volume of *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* the rethinking of contingency is practised both as main theme and as a thematic background of the history of concepts. Explicitly the topic is dealt by *Maureen Whitebrook*, who combines a political reading of two contemporary novels with the discussion of contingency in the contemporary anglophone political theory – with the interesting result that, in the perspective of contingency, novels seem to do better political theory than professional political theorists. A strong support for this thesis can be found in *John Nelson’s* article, in which the spy novels of John Le Carré are read both as an extension of the classical political thought since Hobbes and as a critique of the contemporary theories of international politics, implicitly just from the viewpoint of contingency, which spies both try to reduce and turn to their own advantage.

An increasing acknowledgement has, however, reached also the political, cultural and social theories of today, and its relevance for the *Zeitdiagnose* is discussed in *Risto Eräsaari’s* article. The relevance of the contingency for the understanding the changing practices of contemporary politics is also thematized by *Eeva Aarnio’s* and *Kyösti Pekonen’s* article on the Finnish party programmes.

As opposed to the classical analytical ideal of “defining” of concept, contingency plays a key role in the formation and use of con-

cepts in the interdisciplinary approach called “history of concepts” or “conceptual history”, or with a German term *Begriffsgeschichte*. In this volume we publish four of the contributions of the first international conference, arranged at the Finnish Institute in London in June 1998. An international forum for scholars was founded at that occasion and a “*History of Concepts Newsletter*” has been recently been published by Karin Tilmans and Wyger Velema at the University of Amsterdam.

Each of the contribution on the history of concepts published here also emphasizes its links to contingency, although not always using the word. *Melvin Richter’s* “overview” indicates to some new problematics and challenges to *Begriffsgeschichte* and the problem of contingency is emphasized by the contestability of political and social concepts. *Janet Coleman* discusses the chances and limitations of the history of concepts for the history of ancient and medieval political thought, claiming interestingly that Reinhart Koselleck’s approach sometimes unduly simplifies the contingencies of history. *Ilisa Räsänen*, in her review of the Dutch volume *History of Concepts* wants to apply conceptual history to the analysis of contemporary politics and she also criticizes the search for “foundations”, in the sense of looking for a definite view on the relations between words and concepts or meaning and concepts. I have sketched a somewhat unconventional perspective for comparing the work of two paradigmatic representatives of conceptual history, Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner, by seeing as a common point that their work “can be read as contributions to ... extending contingency to concepts” (for Koselleck cf. also *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* vol. 1, 1997)

In his response to my contribution *Quentin Skinner* assesses his own intellectual development and especially the role of his specific “rhetorical turn”. He explicitly refutes the *communis opinio* that his approach is opposed to the history of concepts and stresses that especially some of his own contributions to the concept of the state well can be included to conceptual history. In addition, it is worth noticing that Skinner also alludes to the role of contingency for his approach in relation to the older views on the history of thought. Characterizing his critique of Lovejoy’s programme for the history of ideas in the late sixties Skinner writes: “I tried ... to speak up for a more radical contingency in the history of thought”. He also evokes

contingency when assessing his own turn towards the work of the theorists of classical eloquence: “I ... have come to share their more contingent understanding of normative concepts and the fluid vocabularies in which they are generally expressed”. In terms of contingency Skinner’s programme, thus, can be interpreted as consisting in two historically separate moves, each of which radicalizes the heuristic use of contingency in his understanding of conceptual changes.

KARI PALONEN

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The concept has now reached also the level of the weeklies. A German author writes in the *Zeit* : “Woran berauschen sich die Zuschauer im Fußballstadion! Nein, nicht Bier. Die *Zeit* “... sie berauschen sich an den Mysterien der Kontingenzt”. Genau denen bin ich auf der Spur: den Mysterien der *Kontingenzt*. Sie fehlt heute in keinem kulturphilosophischen Text.” (Dieter Zimmer, *Die Zeit*, 8.4. 1999, p.2). Even though Herr Zimmer finally claims that “Kontingenzt oft gar nichts bedeutet”, is both his characterization of its use as a slogan and his reference to an earlier *Zeit* article on the contingency of the football – to me always an important source of illustrating political action – characteristic of the situation.