

»The possibilities are endless«: progress and the taming of contingency, by Katrin Bromber, Paolo Gaibazzi, Franziska Roy, Abdoulaye Sounaye, Julian Tadesse, Programmatic Texts No. 9, 2015

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The contours of the future were much clearer in the not so distant past. A telos of linear progress, what Milan Kundera called »the great march of progress«<sup>1</sup> has been one of the dominant narrative constructions of the 19th and 20th centuries, despite, or because of the horrors we so regularly inflict upon ourselves. Such a narrative is based on the idea that society is the subject of general laws that it can be understood leading towards a more perfect future. Elements of this narrative could be found throughout the political spectrum, from W.W. Rostow's »modernization theory« to Amílcar Cabral's revolutionary, anti-colonial nationalism. As noted by the authors of »*The possibilities are endless*«, the rigid laws and loudly proclaimed self-confidence of such grand narratives grow from the sometimes heroic, sometimes terrifying attempts to »tame« contingency, to force an open ended future into the narrow straitjacket of one or two possibilities. In our own era, bereft of many convincing solutions for its spiralling political, economic, environmental, indeed existential crises, it is far more difficult to be confident in the idea that the future will, either through its own volition or through force, lead towards progress, generalised higher living conditions, or even »modernity«, whatever that may mean.

The disquiet with attempts to force multiple, possible futures into a fixed blue print of laws is not new. In 1979 Jean-François Lyotard warned us

to distrust all metanarratives.<sup>2</sup> However, this provides us with few answers towards how this is to be achieved when the remnants of grand narratives, tattered though they may be, still have such a strong influence not only on ideologies and political projects, but also in the theories and methodologies of social science. Even Lyotard's famous dictum remains inexorably bound to what it is trying to escape; the distrust of all metanarratives is a metanarrative. Contingency can only exist in relation to some form of grand narrative structure, otherwise what is contingent? Here, in my opinion, is the true value of what the authors of »*The possibilities are endless*« are proposing. They do not suggest simply trying to identify contingent events in history, the »turning points«, but rather suggest that contingency offers an analytical tool to try and decipher what actors and societies do with the prospect of an open-ended future. The ability, or lack of, to deal with uncertainty and the horizon of expectation that holds the possibility of liberation for some and ruin for others. This offers a productive approach to try and understand the social underpinnings of grand narratives and historical projects without becoming entrapped in an overdetermined logic or offering a simplified triumphalism on their »inevitable« success or decline.

Contingency, as outlined by the authors, is a productive lens through which we can understand the various and often shifting social meanings and

<sup>1</sup> Kundera, Milan. 1984. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

<sup>2</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. 1979. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

outcomes of the grand narratives that have shaped our world. Modernization theory may be a rather embarrassing theoretical relic of the bad old days of ethnocentrism and smug self-regard academically, but as noted by James Ferguson, its myriad of variants are still alive and kicking »on the ground« encapsulating the hopes and dreams of millions for a better life.<sup>3</sup> Such a yearning to »jump start« the march of history onward to something better and new is evident in the work of Bromber, for Ethiopia and Roy, for south Asian youth student groups. Both authors focus on the idea of the »new man«, the actors who embodied the effort to sweep away the past and create a tabula rasa upon which a new society can be born. Their work resonates very well with my own in Mozambique. The idea that it was »backwardness« that allowed the ramshackle Portuguese empire to conquer its African colonies and make them the subject of its oppressive whims for centuries was a major animating force in the liberation struggle led by Frelimo (Mozambique Liberation Front). Upon the assumption of power, Frelimo loudly proclaimed the evil of the »old ways« and the centrality of the »new man« for the brave new world, in the words of Samora Machel, Mozambique's first president:

When Frelimo took up arms to defeat the old order ... We felt the obscure need to create a new society, strong healthy and prosperous, in which people freed from all exploitation would co-operate for the progress of all. In the course of our struggle, in the tough fight we had to wage against reactionary elements, we came to understand our objectives more clearly. We felt especially that the struggle to create new structures would fall within the creation of a new mentality... (Davidson 1984: 800).<sup>4</sup>

The goal here was not simply »national liberation«, but a project of total transformation, starting with the Mozambican population. Once the party had created the »new man«, Mozambique would no longer be a colonial backwater, but a prosperous, industrialised country able to demand the respect of the world's nations. The bitterness at being excluded from the »modern world« and the party's determination to change this was a re-occurring element in Samora's speeches:

But our friends in the West say that if we go about well dressed, if we shave, if we have decent housing we shall lose our African char-

acteristics. Do you know what African characteristics are? A skin, a loincloth, a wraparound cloth, a stick in the hand behind a flock, to be skinny with every rib sticking out, sores on the feet and legs, with a cashew leaf to cover the suppurating wound, jiggers in the toes - that is the African. That is what they see as African characteristics. So when tourists come, they are looking for an African dressed like that. Since that is the »genuine African«. Now when they find us dressed in a tunic and trousers - we are no longer African. They don't take photographs (quoted in Munslow 1985: 91).<sup>5</sup>

The »blank slate« ideology championed by Frelimo and many other liberation movements was frequently authoritarian, brutal and counter-productive, as famously argued by James Scott in *Seeing like a State*.<sup>6</sup> However, the collapse of these projects often brought bewilderment and sorrow as it meant the loss of a future far removed from the misery of the present. As one disillusioned Frelimo cadre told me in despair: »After all the hopes and dreams, years of struggle and hardship, now we are just another African country«.<sup>7</sup>

Through the use of contingency as an analytic category we can explore many of the contradictions inherent in the great attempts of social engineering. Bromber's project focuses on the efforts of the Ethiopian emperor, Haile Sillase to secure his rule following the end of the 2nd World War through the creation of a new kind of citizen. Ethiopia's »new man« was a militarised project of modernisation that would supposedly develop the nation and solidify the power of the emperor. The same people who were to be the foundation of the emperor's rule were at the forefront of the revolution to overthrow him and create a different, modernising project, the socialist »new man«. Roy demonstrates the contradictions and unintended consequences of the nonaligned movement. Sounaye's work examines the possibility that through the very success of Sunnance, reformist Muslims promoting the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, they are perhaps turning against the movement that spawned them as it is no longer sufficiently Islamic. These projects raise issues that I have attempted to deal with in my work, where the Mozambican »new man« of the socialist period became the entrepreneur of capitalism. As argued by the authors, efforts to tame contingency tend to,

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, James. 2006. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Davidson, Basil. 1984. Portuguese Speaking Africa. In *The Cambridge History of Africa*, Volume Eight from 1940-1975. Ed. by Michael Crowder. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 755-811.

<sup>5</sup> Munslow, Barry. 1983. *Mozambique: The Revolutions and its Origins*. London, New York and Lagos: Longman.

<sup>6</sup> Scott, James. C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Sumich, Jason. 2015. The Uncertainty of Prosperity: Dependence and the Politics of Middle Class Privilege in Maputo. *Ethnos*, 1-21.

paradoxically, create more. This insight helps understand the glaring ruptures and subtle continuities of grand projects the authors explore, as in all cases they did create new kinds of subjectivities providing foundations for new social orders, but in ways that destroyed the original intention.

The authors' focus on contingency as opposed to related terms such as risk, uncertainty, chance as such terms: »...often presuppose indeterminacy to be a negative or undesirable element, as indeed revealed by Euro-modernist notions of progress as order and telos" (Bromber et al.: 3). However, instead of simply eschewing terms such as risk, they can also be made into subjects of study. This could be especially useful as capitalism's efforts to mitigate »risk« are the epitome of efforts to »tame« contingency, a truly totalising project, where the iron laws of history give way to the iron laws of algorithms in mapping out every possibility. However many studies of contemporary capitalism fall under the increasingly overused and vague rubric of »neo-liberalism«, where social actors everywhere are forced into the relentless, identical, clockwork routines dictated by the omni-

potent logic of the market. Efforts to complicate this monolithic picture are evident in the projects of Tadesse and Gaibazzi. Tadesse's work examines the connections between capitalism as a narrative and the ad-hoc, contradictory nature of its actual practice by focusing on ways in which the Ethiopian state attempts to »outsource« its own structural weakness through a glorification of the figure of the entrepreneur. While Gaibazzi discusses the ways in which risk, contingency and »luck«, in seeming contradiction to the logic of capitalism, become central to the understanding of success by Soninke merchants in West Africa.

What ties all of the authors' seemingly disparate case studies together is that contingency is a way to explore actors' attitudes, for better or worse, towards the open ended nature of the future, placing this as a central research question instead of hiding it carefully out of sight while creating theories of ever more elegant determinism. In my opinion this is an extremely worthwhile endeavour that will provide the basis of many fruitful discussions to come.