

Some Reflections on the concept paper »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

R. Santhosh, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Madras, Chennai (rsantho@gmail.com)

The concept paper »Possibilities are endless: progress and the taming of contingency« outlines the research agenda of a group of five researchers who uses the conceptual lens of contingency to understand the complex negotiation of human beings with the ideas of progress in different socio-political and historical contexts. The discussion on contingency is really thought provoking as it brings in original and refreshing perspective to look at both the historical as well as contemporary attempts to envision particular, often competing imageries of progress as well as uncertainties inherent in them. One of the most significant hallmarks of this framework is the non-fixity and conceptual flexibility associated with these conceptions of progress as well as contingency. Deliberately moving away from a Eurocentric understanding of progress emerged from modernization theories, the paper locates contingency as a tool to understand the articulations and manifestations of diverse forms of progress envisioned in non-European settings. The analytical possibilities offered by contingency are manifold when it is seen not as incidents or events, but as reflective, subjective understanding about uncertain future and diverse ideas, practices, and sentiments that ultimately inform progress related projects.

It is evident that contingency cannot be analyzed in isolation at any historic point as it is inextricably interconnected with notions of progress in a dialectic manner. In that sense, contingency as an analytical tool, along with the indeterminateness of reality and unpredictability of the future, also need to be acutely aware of the epistemological, ideological as well as political critique of pro-

gress that they encounter at every stage. Because, these ideas of progress envision certain blueprint for the future and quite often, there are counter-narratives and alternatives proposed simultaneously from ideologically adversarial or divergent positions, eventually resulting in one among these competing versions getting predominance over others due to complex power dynamics. Especially in contexts where future is shaped by certain ideologies- whether religious or secular- the articulations of contingency often emerge from a staunch critique of these very ideologies and in that sense, these conceptions of contingencies too are deeply influenced and shaped by ideologies.

While the analytical possibilities of contingency emerging from its rather broad and flexible conception offer enormous possibilities to look at the past as well as the present societies, let me voice certain concerns about the possible limitations of this definitional and conceptual flexibility and pliability. It appears the term contingency is rather deliberately defined in a loose manner so that it can be effectively applied in every historical and socio-political context. While that provides sufficient flexibility to carry out research, that might hamper the overall coherence of the research theme and resultantly, the individual research topics might appear too disparate and isolated, not able to form a coherent theme. While individual projects are able to identify problematics of progress and contingency in their respective fields, what might be lacking is an overarching conceptual frame of these same concepts that would have otherwise given specific direction and theoretical orientation to these studies so that this theoretical

vantage point of contingency would have illuminated and provided a thematic coherence to these studies as a whole.

Evidently, it is not easy to provide a conceptual category that would provide incisive analytical insights into the diverse temporal and spatial contexts foregrounded by these studies without compromising on its analytical possibilities. Probably that is why formulation of similar concepts was made within in more constricted socio-temporal boundaries. For example, when Ulrich Beck discusses the concept of risk, he pointedly presents it as emerging out of the imperatives of reflexive modernity and specifically situates it as a result of the unintended consequences of modern rationality and developmentalism. Similarly, the emerging literature on precarity also situates the term in the globalized context where certainties in terms of ontology as well as material conditions are significantly challenged. Though these two terms may be negative in connotations, their situatedness in a specific socio-historic and temporal context such as a global present make them capable of sharp analysis on various negotiations with the ideas of progress.

While the concept paper highlights the necessity to understand the historical and epistemic shifts in terms of understanding contingency, it just stops short of offering more specific frameworks to undertake such an endeavour with reference to the individual studies mentioned here. In the remaining section of this note, an attempt is made to think about such possibilities. With respect to the research sites in the Islamic world, can we formulate a more pointed understanding of contingency emerging from Islamic theological or sociological knowledge systems as the notions of progress and contingency are heavily influenced by these epistemologies? How do we understand the symbiotic relationship in the Muslim world between the notions of progress on the one hand and personal piety and societal moral order as envisioned in specific Islamic theological strands on the other? How are the ideas of progress intricately connected with diverse conceptions of ›true Islam‹ and various processes of authenticating these versions? Can we locate the attempts within Islamic traditions aimed at the refashioning of ethical selves and creation of pious subjectivity as ways of taming the contingency? And if so how do such attempts vary with respect to the theological, temporal and historical contexts? This assumes significance especially in a globally interconnected world where numerous versions of Islam are articulated and disseminated across the globe, making the disjuncture between experience and expectation for a believer more acute and immediate.

I believe that since two studies look at the historical context and other four at the contemporary

societies, more focussed conceptualization of contingency and progress could be attempted by problematizing the character of nation state in these contexts. The governmental rationality, coupled with a vision of developmentalism modelled after the western notion of modernization had created distinct models of progress as well as contingencies across the societies during the mid-twentieth century. These include the disciplining of the population, their bodies, cultural and political spheres and as Foucault argued, even aimed at the creation of new human subjects. These experiences need to be conceptualized more rigorously and contrasted with the contemporary discourse of progress and manifestations of contingencies as the very characteristics of state sovereignty, development discourse and citizen-subjects have undergone radical transformations with the onset of globalization.

On a similar note, is it possible to think of more pointed notions of contingency emerging as a result of larger political and economic transformations across the study areas? How are the unfolding economic realities and uncertainties shape imaginations about progress and the inherent scepticism about the future? Can uncertainties emerge out of neoliberal economic policies and increasing role of civil society organization present us with a more pointed framework to conceptualize specific forms of contingency, indeterminacy and efforts to tame them? I have seen such specific attempts in this direction in my study on the palliative care movement in Kerala, India where realising the limited role of the state, religious and civil society actors have made significant contributions to shape the field of public health through voluntarism and activism.

I found the discussion on contingency by connecting it with the disjunction between expectation and experience really fascinating and believe that such an analytical take has enormous potential. However, this formulation needs further contextualization and theorization as the material and cultural conditions that exacerbate this disjunction are quite different in the times of modernity and late modernity. It is evident that globalization, in its diverse manifestations, have significantly influenced these processes and also provides us with the conceptual frameworks to comparatively analyse the disjunction that happen between experience and expectations in these two temporal contexts. For instance, what kinds of ruptures, anxieties, and possibilities that global processes and apparatus of cultural globalization bring forth are central in understanding this increasing disjuncture in the contemporary global societies? What are the processes of socio-cultural disembedding and re-embedding - both material and virtua - taking place in these study locales that inform us about the rupture taking place between experi-

ence and expectations? How do these processes get exacerbated with the rapid transformations in the temporal and spatial aspects of global society that fundamentally redefines the social reality as argued by scholars like Manuel Castells? In short, what are the theoretical possibilities brought in by the globalization theories to sharpen the concept of contingency in the contemporary world?

The concept paper also motivates one to think about the methodological challenges emerging out of the socio-temporal aspects of the studies. Especially with reference to the historical case studies, what are the methodological precautions to be adopted while addressing conceptions of progress

and contingency without falling into the trap of teleology? How do such methodological formulations differ while examining similar phenomenon in the contemporary societies?

It is evident that the large research canvas elucidated in the concept paper is challenging as well as intellectually rewarding at the same time. The diverse geographies, temporal and social contexts would add considerable academic rigour to these studies that use the conceptions of contingency and progress in highly innovative and original ways. I look forward to the fascinating research outputs from these studies and wish the research team all the very best.