

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

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on one of your Programmatic Texts (no. 9, 2015) on the question of contingency and its potential to frame a comparative research project covering different time and space milieus. I will refer to it as one project even as I recognize that there are several projects that constitute the broad framework.

In general, I found the framework of contingency very fruitful and illuminating. I appreciated the focus on temporality built into the project on the study of one region or state over a long period of time. I recognized, particularly in the several studies on Ethiopia, that the project is linked to earlier projects at the ZMO. The Ethiopian »case« study is also the most elaborate, compared to the ones on South Asia and Niger. The Ethiopian case focuses on studies identifying a number of attempts at controlling and managing contingency over several periods. It might be interesting to see if this focus on contingency unsettles the results of earlier projects on state, modernization or trans-locality in Ethiopia and elsewhere at the ZMO. I propose that a similar longitudinal view is taken in the other regions.

The project is clearly conscious of avoiding a Eurocentric framework imposed on the rest of the world. By using contingency, it successfully focuses on an underlying condition that confronts various peoples of the world. But I like the fact that Europe is not completely forgotten, as its impact has and continues to be felt. But perhaps it might be useful to include a sub-project on the history of contingency in Europe. This text refers to several scholars like Koselleck and MacIntyre working or writing about Europe or North America. But the

text/project seem to pick up terms and meanings from them, that begs the question. What do these terms mean in the history of working with contingency in Europe and North America over a longer time framework? I know that ZMO is committed to the study of the non-West, but can it afford to avoid the study of contingency in the history of the West?

Nevertheless, with or without Europe, the project focuses on a wide canvass of contexts: India, Ethiopia and Niger. Their locations and wider contexts provide a good foundation for deep analysis and comparisons. I have mentioned how the »West« might be included, but I also think that other regions might also support a broader comparative reflection and analysis. I was thinking about Latin America and North Africa/Middle East with different cultural and political histories.

In the introduction to the text, I noticed that the idea of contingency was launched with a reflection on the idea of progress. The authors then make a distinction between Progress and progress. At the same time, there is a clearly felt desire to avoid the term and associated meanings of modernity. I think that contingency successfully places a question mark over both (progress and modernity). I particularly think that progress becomes one of several responses to contingency, and loses its significance as the report proceeds. Is it a victim of the contingency of writing a report? Did it provide an anchor at the beginning, and lose its power against other ways in which people have dealt with contingency? The project seems to be a great way of displacing the centralizing power of progress, modernity and rationality in the study of cultures.

But what if one starts with Ethiopia or India, and identifies contingency as a starting point there, and not in Europe? Would the project unfold in a different way?

I noticed that neo-liberal economic thinking appears in several places as the cause of contingency. I agree with this, but the project would benefit from a close study of contingency in the markets. The philosopher and statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb has written several very interesting books on the contingency of the world in general, and the markets in particular.¹ He and others have spawned a market of dealing with contingency, using various tools from psychology and cognitive theory. The contingency of liberal economics from Adam Smith to the present should not be overlooked. It might be worthwhile to look at the links between African migrant traders and Wall Street traders? Or a study of the neo-liberal market dealing with contingency that directly impacts on contingency elsewhere.

The project brings out very well contingency in relation to the political and the cultural. In this way, it is able to focus on resources employed to work with contingency in political projects and cultural movements. Based on my comment above, I would include economic movements as well. And they may all be related to each other. What is missing is a study or awareness of the deep cultural histories of contingency. There is one small reference in the Niger project on the relation between luck and »destiny«. More attention might be paid to this history, as it appears directly or indirectly in the field.

The project lends itself to a study of contingency in life stories and body politics. MacIntyre's argument that contingency was a deeply human fact of life challenges us to thinking about contingencies on deeply personal levels, bringing in class, ethnicities, religion, language and location in personal narratives and praxis. The focus on individual actors would help the project to appreciate contingency as an opportunity, a threat, or an impairment. The body politics that emerges from this may illuminate the broader political and cultural canvases drawn in other parts of the project.

Contingency on the individual level seems to be an alternative to identity or even multiple identities. The idea of identity includes or subsumes the idea of stability and unity that sustains the personal in a variety of contexts. The idea of multiple or changing identities have helped to break the illusi-

on of stability implied in being part of a nation or cultural community. A focus on contingency provides an opportunity to think about the person in a radically different frame. Rather than working with stability and accommodating instability, contingency begins with the »fact« of instability and how mechanisms maintain or create stability. Can one speak about identity still? I think not.

But beyond body politics of a moment or time period, life trajectories of actors engaging or living with contingencies might open a window to temporality in a different way. A life trajectory might be long, including several decades. So a life may be challenged by contingency in a debilitating way, but then that same life may embrace and thrive in contingency later. At each stage, one would have to be attentive to the broader political and cultural contexts, and the strategies and praxis of dealing with contingency by actors. Life trajectories might be observed, or they may be collected as narratives told in reflective interviews or autobiographies.

¹ Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. 2012. *Antifragile: Things That Gain From Disorder*. Random House Incorporated; Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. 2010. *The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable Fragility*. Random House; Taleb, Nassim. *Foiled By Randomness*. 2005. *The Hidden Role of Chance in Life and in the Markets*. Random House Incorporated.