Tendencies of the 1920s:
On the Discourse of Classical Modernity in Germany

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I

It is difficult to say anything about the 1920s in Germany that has not already been said in the same or a similar way. Even the title of these considerations has been borrowed from the great Berlin Exhibition that in the late 1970s presented the aesthetic production of the 1920s comprehensively and which documented the competing tendencies in painting, architecture and literature under the heading of Classical Modernity.' Whether borrowed or not, it appears the most appropriate term, because of its vagueness, as one attempts to clarify some of the strands of the discourse that guided the social construction of reality in the 1920s. All that existed in the 1920s were tendencies and this fact is not altered even if one follows the habit of extending that period by three years and then considers it merely as the crisis-ridden prelude to the catastrophe of European modernity, embellished with a political and aesthetic dance on the volcano. While the 1920s carried the seeds of the Third Reich within them they were not destined to lead to it even though there were pointers in that direction. At least one thing runs counter to this view: history is always seen by those who make it or who suffer it as an open venture, and it can only be seen in this way. If the concept of 'historical action' has any meaning at all then it presupposes relative openness of the future. Just as any other action it is based on a choice between a number of mutually exclusive options which are real and precisely for this reason do not determine the future. Only where the outcome of a case is not fixed can we speak of action in any meaningful sense as opposed to mere execution – whether it be God's plan for our salvation or a secular law of history (see Bubner, *1984:* ch. 1). German society in the *1920s,* too, saw itself as a society with an open future - to understate the case. While it is true that in this period some anticipated the eventual outcome - and since *1922* Italy provided a case study of that possibility – it is also true that only a few regarded this outcome as the only possible one and most did not even see it as likely. Fascism constituted in the selfunderstanding of the Weimar republic only one among a number of competing possibilities and it became a realistic political option for larger sections of societies only around *1929* (K6nig, *1961: 105).* For this reason the emphasis in the title is on

the *tendencies* of the *1920s*. This also means positions and options within classically modern diagnoses of society.

'Classical modernity' serves as an umbrella term for the diverse aesthetic tendencies of the *1920s* that can't be fully understood without reference to the social and cultural critiques that correspond to them and frequently developed out of them. They characterize the philosophical and political discourse of the *1920s* well beyond the realm of aesthetics.' However, these trends did not on the whole originate in the *1920s* but only came to their fruition at this time. All the innovating ideas such as expressionism, abstraction and functionalism were already present before the First World War in the various fields of literature, painting, architecture. But whereas in Wilhelmine Germany it had remained marginal and eccentric, it now became mainstream. Its raison d'etre consisted now no longer in being different from tradition and in projecting and rehearsing alternative possibilities but in somehow making sense of a changed social reality. It was in the *1920s* that Germany experienced for the first time and unavoidably the condition we call 'modernity'.

A society is modern if its course is no longer determined mainly by tradition and its orientations towards only one possible future. The expectations of members need not be tied to past experience and may even be opposed to it. Socially, modernity is characterized by individuals being released from their traditional and comprehensive group affiliations with the consequence of increasing social and geographic mobility.

The effect of these social conditions on everyday life can be seen in the plurality of existential projects and habits of life in one place at one particular time. It is a plurality in which singular life projects and habits are realized side by side or obstruct each other; they cornplement or exclude one another, but they are always established autonomously without being necessarily interrelated. If they are interrelated, however, they then become mutually relativizing and present differing, maybe disparate, ways of living. The simultaneous presence of heterogeneous possibilities requires the constant and conscious construction of subjective and social coherence in order to exist and to be able to act. But none of these constructions of self and of society can endure because they can always be relativized by merely one other possibility and because their continuance has as its precondition the reduction of heterogeneous options. Furthermore, none of these constructions of coherence can be based on the basis of one single criterion in the sense of a substantive – and thereby definitive – ontological grounding; they are irreducibly self-supporting. Therefore, realities can in these conditions only be anchored contextually and social order can only be contingent – it could always be different.

Metaphysically speaking, modern societies are always completely immanent and not the historical site of a transcendental purpose; they functionally integrate plural realities and their corresponding segmentary relationships rather than completely determine them; they are formed by temporary relations rather than definitive bonds. Phenomenologically, they are present in the metropolitan city and its corresponding urban way of life.
Modernity in this sense came to be realized for the first time in the Berlin of the *1920s*. Contemporaries experienced it automatically as an absolutely open and thereby highly unstable situation - with all the irritations, acuteness and radicalism that accompany such an experience.

II

The background to all this was to an extent formed by the individual and collective consequences of the traumatic experience of the First World War. Robert Musil (1978: 1072) noted with his characteristic irony in 1921 that

> I believe that the experience since 1914 will have taught most people that we are almost unformed, unexpectedly malleable, ready for anything; we can be moved to the extremes of good and bad just like the pointer on a very sensitive pair of scales. It is probably going to get even worse as people come to escape more and more the ethical constraints that are already only semi-effective.

The course of the war demonstrated that the unthinkable could happen and that from then on nothing could be regarded as impossible anymore – ever since fighting escaped strategic calculation and turned into an unstoppable battle of material and crazy trench warfare. Something had happened that went beyond anything that could have been imagined; it thus not only invalidated all previous experience but put into question the very possibility of experience itself. Precisely because the unimaginable that lies beyond the horizon of the possible had become real, the horizon of the possible had after the war lost its limits - and with it the sphere of possible experiences that requires such limits. What could still be considered as a valid experience and what could not? How could experience still be possible when experiences during and after the war could not be made to cohere since all criteria of meaningful coherence had been devalued? Walter Benjamin (1972b: 214) may have expressed this in the most moving way in 1933:

> Experience has been devalued, and is continuing to fall sharply. Never have experiences been disproved more thoroughly than strategic ones in trench warfare, economic ones through inflation, physical ones through the battle of material, ethical ones through those in power. A generation that remembers coming to school in horse-drawn trams found itself out in the open in a landscape in which only the clouds remained unchanged and below them, in a field of force of destructive currents and explosions, the diminutive, fragile human body.

One could interpret a key element in thought and action through the - not so very far fetched – combination of one of Benjamin's concepts with Carl Schmitt's view of the 'sudden impact' of the 'suspension' of experience. In 1933, Gottfried Benn (1980: 127), also with the help of hindsight, could see it as having led to 'the gruesome chaos of a collapse of reality and an inversion of values'. For him, it represented the 'dissolution of nature, the dissolution of history' and 'even the most concrete forces of state and society' were no longer 'comprehensible in a substantive way' and had become mere 'functions'. There was 'no reality' left, 'at most its distorted face'. Using a technical term that refers to the deployment of the army in internal dispute and which became fashionable in cultural criticism and inflated with historically significant content, contemporaries called it the 'state of emergency' in the sense of a totally exceptional situation. Schmitt (1985: 18), in 1922, defined that as the 'suspension of the whole existing order'.' It, quite simply, represented the sudden arrival of something new, something that was so exceptionally new that all known means for dealing with the new proved inadequate.
However, the specifically dramatic aspect that coloured the perception of these times and that came to be referred to by the widely used catchword of 'chaos'was not restricted to the immediate post-war years. In fact, the unprecedented state of destabilizing uncertainty continued. In 1927, Klaus Mann (1927: 13) wrote that

> we are in the peculiar state of constantly expecting virtually anything to happen, and this keeps us alert and stops us from becoming rigid. Will we next week find ourselves with a monarchy and an emperor? We would not be surprised in the least. Will we, the day after tomorrow, get a communist regime with terror and red flag? – nothing can surprise us.

As Benjamin noted (1972b: 215) in 1933, this situation was experienced as a *tabula rasa* - but as a *tabula rasa* that could also be used as a drawing board and that was used as such. But is was also a *tabula rasa* that unavoidably had to be used as a drawing board. It is this ambivalence between possibility and necessity in constructing something new that decisively characterized the strategic situation of classical modernity.

The avant-garde experiments at the time of the German Empire turned into attempts to create a 'new reality', as Berm (1980: 128) and others referred to this situation. By interpreting this experience as 'transcendental homelessness', to use Lukács's 1920 formulation (1934: 32), it was not so much the case of re-establishing some 'totality' but, in Siegfried Kracauer's (1974: 7) phrase coined in 1922 which borrowed from Lukács, 'to reach the fulfilled realm of a reality underneath an elevated transcendent meaning and to lead a homeless humanity back into the new-old fields of a god-imbued reality', into a 'new reality and a new absolute' as Benn (1980: 129), who was an implacable opponent of Kracauer, later called it. Benjamin's call on 'present-day philosophy', formulated already in 1917 in his Swiss exile in opposition to the neo-Kantian reduction of experience to a mere 'world of possible objects', was to establish a 'new and concrete totality of experience', that is, 'religion'. Later, in 1936, and in the context of his media theory - which still appears unquestionably modern and which has recently even been interpreted, in addition, as postmodern - he states that the problem of form regarding the 'new art' (film), consists in evidencing the ontological ground of modern realities, i.e. that 'which is nature within them' (Benjamin, 1972a: 170). This is one source of insight for the various attempts at penetrating through to the elementary dimension of the phenomena – be it in painting and architecture which in the *1920s* pushed the reduction of available means of representation in the direction of basic geometric forms; be it in political theory, where Schmitt *(1987)* took recourse in the most extreme option in order to arrive at a 'substantive' concept of the political in the fundamental relationship of friend and enemy, a concept of the political that aimed at the ordered homogenization of 'chaotic' heterogeneity. Schmitt dealt with the problem in juridical terms and derived from it the possibility and necessity of sovereign order-creating decisions, and not only with respect of juridical issues. In fact, his metaphysics of decision had evident ambitions in the direction of action-theoretical systernatizations -and, later on, barbaric political consequences.

'Exceptions cannot be subsumed', he wrote in *1922;* and in exceptional circumstances the 'norm' gets 'annihilated'. But every norm presupposes a 'normal situation', and no norms can 'have validity in situations which are abnormal in respect of them' (Schmitt, *1987: 46)* because 'there are no norms that are applicable where chaos exists' (Schmitt, *1985: 20).* The latter would consequently have to be removed through a decisive act by a sovereign authority standing above legal institutions which would establish legality and order through a 'political act'. This, in *1934,* ipso facto read like this:

At the Convention of German jurists in Leipzig, on 3rd. October 1933, the Führer spoke about the state and the law. He evidenced the difference between a substantive law not severed from ethics and justice and the empty jurisdiction of an untrue neutrality and he developed the inner contradictions of the Weimar system that destroyed itself through this neutral legality and submitted to its enemies .... All the moral outrage over the shame of this collapse came together in Adolf Hitler and became the driving force in his political acts. All the experiences and warnings of Germany's unhappy past are alive within him. Most are afraid of the severity of his warnings and prefer to seek refuge in an evasive and harmonising superficiality. The Führer, however, acknowledges the warnings from German history. This gives him the right and the strength to lay the foundations for a new order. The Führer guards the law from its worst abuses when, at the moment of danger, he establishes immediate law on the basis of his leadership and as the highest legal authority.... In truth, the Führer's action represented authentic jurisdiction. It is not subject to the law but is itself the highest law.... (Schmitt, 1985: 199).

III

It does not require a particularly sensitive hermeneutic fusion of horizons with the self-diagnosis formulated in the *1920s* to grasp that antecedent events were experienced as the catastrophic collapse of a whole universe; and what took its place did not even amount to an impoverished copy of it. Experience, however, is not possible prior to interpretation but only with the help of criteria of interpretation which translate the brute facts of events and occurrences into an experience by giving them a coherent meaning. These criteria of interpretation contain indicators in the form of expectations of the real which, in a given social context, are fostered as the expectations of a particular quality of reality.

Reality, seen historically, is a most changeable entity as Hans Blumenberg *(1964: 10)* has shown, even if hard-headed empiricists will never accept it. He distinguishes four concepts of reality: the ancient 'reality of a momentary evidence'; the concept prevalent from medieval times to the threshold of the modern era, that of a 'guaranteed reality'; the early modern one of contextually grounded and constituted reality; and the modern one of recalcitrant, completely unavailable, contingent realities. What is decisive here is that the reality of a momentary evidence and guaranteed reality are both homogeneous while contextually grounded and recalcitrant reality are in principle heterogeneous. The expectations placed upon actors within classical modernity in relation to a 'new reality' – in the singular! – and which shaped their discourse in a strategic way represented the irritated reaction to a progressive pluralization and vehement presence of recalcitrant realities. This was be-

cause the heterogeneous reality came to be experienced as a levelling relativity - and interpreted as the condition of bottomless contingency.

Something that is contingent can always be different, and it can be different because it has no necessary grounds for its existence (Makropoulos, 1990). On the one hand, therefore, contingency applies to everything that is accidental, unavailable and uncontrollable; on the other hand it is also everything that is the result of human action in the sense of an arbitrary construct which could always be different. It is this artificiality that defines contingency as a problem – even prior to the ontological recharging of the issue which shaped the current discourse of classical modernity and which, by the way, is still effective today via Critical Theory. It is, then, already the action-theoretical dimension of the issue, which precedes this metaphysics of contingency, that is a problem.

To act is to decide between various possibilities and it presupposes the existence of various real possibilities if one wants to speak of action in any meaningful way as opposed to the carrying out of a predetermined course of events (Bubner, *1984: 38).* But if to act is to decide between a number of possibilities, then the immediate question that arises concerns the criteria of this decision. Within a homogeneous reality, these criteria are furnished by experiences obtained within a defined horizon of possibility which corresponds to this one reality and which acquires a significant boundary through the fact that every horizon of possibility is precisely not unlimited but is derived and acquired from reality (Luhmann, *1984: 152).* But what happens when this reality multiplies into differing contextual realities, thereby widening the horizon of possibility towards the infinite? And what happens when the unimaginable takes place, when realities become present in a traumatic way and previous experience becomes devalued by the awareness that there no longer exists a bounded horizon of possibility and that anything might be possible at any time? What then arises is termed, by Schmitt and others, an exceptional situation, i.e. that normative vacuum and *tabula rasa* which provides decisionist conceptions of action in aesthetics as well as in the political realm with irresistible evidence. From this we get the heated pathos of decisiveness that marks the classical-modern scenario.

It is characteristic of the discourse of classic modernity that contingency came to be radicalized at the outset into absolute contingency, leaving open the possibility not only of relating to the world in different ways but also of the world itself being different. It is in this sense that Lukács used the concept of contingency, and thereby expanded it well beyond the conditions prevailing at the beginning of the century to encompass the whole of the modern period. 'A contingent world and

problematic individuals' formed here 'reciprocally determining realities' (Lukács, *1972: 67)*. In this way, the situation that was experienced as highly unsettling indeterminacy no longer just represented the actual situation after the First World War but the whole epoch of modernity, if not more. From within this perspective, the *1920s* came to be perceived not so much as a crisis of modern life; rather, modernity itself came to be regarded as the culmination of the crisis of history that erupted with the advent of the modern epoch. The core of this crisis resided, in the terms of the philosophy of history then prevalent, which Lukács had coined and Kracauer took up, in this: the new epoch lacked the 'spontaneous totality of being' of previous epochs, that is the unquestioned evidence of meaning prior to any reflective thought. The same issue came to be called by Berm 'indubitable reality' and by Schmitt 'legitimate order' as opposed to a merely legalized one; Benjamin, finally, referred to it elegiacally as 'aura', as the nonarbitrary presence of meaning.
But this longing for the absolute appears as only one side, one trait in the classic modern discourse. After all, the radical indeterminacy of the ontologically contingent itself opens up the possibility of forming (in the aesthetic and political sense) freedom. Without this freedom, the phantasy of everything being available that dominated the intellectual climate of classical modernity can not be understood, nor can the universality of the various political, social, philosophical and, especially, aesthetic options in competition with each other in the *1920s*. It is precisely because nothing remained fixed that one could experiment with the new, and did so; and this forms one side of classical modernity that still exerts some fascination. However, it is noteworthy and characteristic especially for the avant-garde of this epoch that its members were not really completely committed to the quest for new options. The openness of the situation came to be regarded rather as a transitional state that had to be brought to an end, possibly by taking the initiative oneself and maybe even through use of force in an emergency situation - and such a situation now existed. And what is today often considered as the ambivalence between a quest for new options and the parallel will to totalize has not really been that ambivalent. The 'exceptional situation' of absolute contingency, it was agreed, had to be brought to an end and for this reason the constructivist freedom was at the outset channelled towards the attempt to use the existing ontological contingency for its own complete *Aufhebung*.

Lukács (1972: 30) gave possibly the clearest expression to this impulse. Modernity he saw as 'the epoch for which the extensive totality of life is no longer immediately apparent, for which the meaningfulness of life has become a problem and which, yet, intends towards totality'. This was not only meant analytically; Lukács,

after all, derived from it the positive function of modern art as a 'created totality'. And he was not the only one. Piet Mondrian's (in Hess, 1956: 102) models of universal harmonies represented the media of a 'new reality'. Walter Gropius (1965: 102) deduced the idea of the Bauhaus emphatically from the 'idea of a new unitary world which contains within itself the resolution to all antagonistic tensions'. It was this that underlay the programme of the merging of art and life that practically electrified classical modernity: the programme of the reconciliation of art and life, their 'fusion', the significance of which was 'the spiritual reconstruction of Europe', as Theo van Doesburg *(1984: 178)* wrote in *1923.*

It is at this precise point that Benjamin, who radicalized the discourse of classical modernity beyond its own boundary, starts his critique in which he attempts to evidence the infinite contingency even of all constructions of totality that presented themselves as products of self-assured aesthetic and political actions. If these constructions of totality were exclusively based on self-assured subjectivity with the aim of compensating for the transcendental deficit, then they were not only contingent themselves but also based on some form of contingency, i.e. subjective volition. Rather than leading to a reduction or even elimination of contingency, these attempts in fact amplified it exponentially. Benjamin offered here not only a fundamental critique of Schmitt's decisionism, nor just a thoroughgoing rejection of all modern conceptions of aesthetic subjectivity together with their extension into the realm of the political which, since the early Romantics, attributed to the artist the privilege of being the last resort for the formation of coherence. Benjamin rightly noted a theological element in this. What he offered went far beyond it towards the radical questioning of the modern Enlightenment concept of the sovereignty of the subject.

In this way, Benjamin pushed the discourse of classical modernity to its aporetic limit - without ever really leaving it. It was taken for granted by him, too, that contingency will have to be overcome. The only question for him was whether this could be achieved from within it. For this reason, he put his hopes neither in constructions of totality nor in conceptions of the avant-garde but in the potential for generating spontaneous ontological evidence from contemporary realities with the help of the new media. This, however, went well beyond constructivism and towards revelation - while still being consistent with the logic of ontological contingency (see Makropoulos, *1989: 34, 133).*

IV

The ontological discourse of modernity which Benjamin had explored most exhaustively represents the dominant, if not hegemonic discourse in Germany in the *1920s* and today still stands for what we mean by 'classical modernity'. But there were also other discourses in the *1920s.* Musil, in *1922*, depicted the core issue which he also considered to characterize his historical situation thus:

> There is a distinct feeling of chance in everything that happened. We would be stretching our belief in historical necessity too far were we trying to find a unitary meaning underlying all the decisions we experienced. It is easy with hindsight to find some necessary causes leading to the failure of German diplomacy or military leadership. But everyone knows that things could also have turned out differently and that decisions hung on a hair's breadth. It almost seems to be the case that events were not determined at all and only made out to be so afterwards.

Musil used the world 'chance' and not 'contingency'. 'Chance, or put more precisely', as he corrects himself, ' "unlawlike necessity", where one thing leads to the other, not completely arbitrarily yet without the chain of events forming being governed by any lawlike necessity.' Put differently,

> Quite simply, what we call historical necessity is not at all a lawlike necessity where a given p is followed by a given v, but it is as determined as in the case where lone thing leads to another'. There may well be laws involved ... but there is also something unique about it as it happens at this point in time. As an aside, let us note that as human beings we, too, are partly one of these unique occurrences. (Musil, 1978: 1077, 1081, 1078)

Musil may have given his most telling depiction of historical contingency - which philosophers of history have always been trying to remove – in *1930* in his novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften.* Here we read that

> [T]he law of world history ... is nothing more than the governing principle of the old Kakania, that of 'muddling through'. Kakania was an immensely clever state. The path of history does not resemble that of a billiard ball that, once in motion, will follow a particular course; rather, it resembles the movements of the clouds or someone strolling who gets distracted by a shadow here or a group of people there or by a peculiar intersection of frontages of houses and who finally ends up in a place he doesn't know nor had aimed for. Losing-one's-way seems to be a part of the course of world history. The present is like the last house in a town that somehow no longer quite belongs to the other houses. (1978: 361)

Musil rejected all attempts to reduce historical and social reality to one single cause or causal nexus. 'In reality', he wrote in 1922**,**

> causal links get diffused at the first links of a chain into an infinite width. In the physical world we found a solution - the concept of function, but in the sphere of the mind we are impotent. Our intellect deserts us. Not because it is shallow, or as though we could rely on anything anyway, but because we did not exert ourselves. (Musil, 1978: 1056).

What Musil calls for here is functionalist thinking also in relation to social and cultural phenomena. Within the dominant way of stating the issue at the time, this however was itself an indicator of what it was that had to be overcome. Benn *(1980: 128)* can stand here for others when he states that the present signalled the

> dissolution of nature ... [the] dissolution of history. The established realities of space and time are now a function of formulae; health and disease now a function of consciousness; even the most concrete forces of state and society can no longer be given a substantive content.

Musil's position was quite different. He also noted the 'chaos' around him but without falling back to concepts of philosophy of history or ontological bonds but took as his starting point the 'principle of insufficient causes' and suggested that the situation be considered as a 'total laboratory' in which 'the best ways of being a person are rehearsed and new ones invented' (Musil, *1978: 152).* This, however, required a more flexible ethics. As he wrote in *1921* after his account of his war experiences,

> every ethical event has 'sides': from one it is good, from the other bad, from the third it could be either. What is good is not a constant but a variable function. It is quite *simply* due to a laziness of thought that we have not yet found a logical expression for this function, one which would satisfy our demand for unequivocal meaning without reducing the many-sidedness of the facts; it is just as unlikely for public morality to collapse because of this as mathematics to disintegrate because of the realization that one and the same number can be formed by the squaring of two different numbers. (Musil, 1978: 1073)

Such a position, which rejected the quest for the final coherence of reality did not, however, remain limited to diagnoses of the time penned by writers. The expert in constitutional law, Hermann Heller, opposed in *1928* the attempt by Schmitt to provide a foundation for 'social homogeneity' substantively on the basis of the relationship of friend and enemy - something that came later to be called *'Artgleich-*

heit'; in its stead, Heller established a material-operative conception derived from the 'sociable-unsociable nature of man', that is 'his two essential qualities of difference and sociability'.
Sociability was for Heller 'never just a natural commonality but always also a conscious decision', that is, something artificial – something that could really not be defined ontologically. Heller insisted on the 'eternally antagonistic structure of human society' and stressed the essential dynamic and thus temporal nature of all social structure. ' "Social homogeneity" ', he noted, 'can ... never mean the elimination of the necessarily antagonistic structure of society' and can only be realized in a democratic society whose 'specificity lies in the associative nomination and the administrative and not sovereign position of its representatives' (Heller, *1971: 424, 428, 426).* Heller here argues not only against Schmitt but also against sections within his own social democratic party in his attempt to deal with contingency rather than trying to eliminate it. In the *1920s* we can see an almost strategic dichotomization of the discourse of modernity which placed side by side plainly incompatible expectations of actual developments and corresponding theoretical-practical conceptions aimed at finding solutions. To outline one other contrast, Lukács's characterization of the metaphysical situation of modernity is instructive. He not only formulated the concept of 'transcendental homelessness' but also the concept of 'transcendental *Heimatlessness'* which *came* to achieve great prominence. It contained a striving which the early Romantic poet Novalis *(1978: 373)* expressed in this way: 'Where are we heading? we are always on the way home'. Even in *1947*, Ernst Bloch *(1979:1628)* prophesied this to be the destination of 'society and existence' once they 'became radical'.

> The root of history is labouring, creative man, transforming and transcending what is given. Once he has taken control of his life and established real democracy without objectivation and alienation something arises in the world that we can glimpse only in our childhood and where we have never yet been: *Heimat.*

This stress on Heimat, in the 1920s was always more than a *vö1kisch* notion, one which coloured the expectation of actual developments across the political spectrum. Against it, and against the whole repertoire of positive anticipations in the dominant discourse of the time, Helmuth Plessner developed a radical counterposition at around 1928. The conclusion to his 'Introduction' to Philosophical Anthropology, which derived the 'constitutive rootlessness' of man from the 'excentricity of his forms of life, his location in no-man's land' came to this:

If he seeks a final answer, one way or another, he is only left with a leap into faith. ... Ultimate bonds and integration, the place to live and die, safety, reconciliation with fate, interpretation of existence, *Heimat*, can only be provided by religion.... Whoever wishes to come home, return to the *Heimat*, to belong, can do so only by surrendering to faith. But those living the life of the mind never come back home.

Plessner continues in more emphatic form,

The cosmos can only be believed, and while we believe we are 'always coming back home'. Only in faith can there be 'benevolent' cyclical infinitude, the return of things from their absolute otherness. The mind however points man and things away from itself and beyond itself. Its sign is the straight path of endless infinitude. Its element is the future. It destroys the earth's cycle and, like the Christ of Marcion, opens up for us blissful strangeness. (Plessner, 1981: 419, 424)

V

The unquestioned way in which ontological ties came to be presupposed as indispensable and that definitive qualities within a homogeneous world came to be desired set the dominant discourse of modernity on issues and attempted solutions on a collision course with modernity itself. In a critical vein, modernity came to be experienced as conflict-laden and incoherent; heterogeneity as lost coherence; plurality as a relativism: levelling, devaluing and destructive of quality. As this condition itself was interpreted as 'transcendental homelessness' in a 'contingent world' it was only logical to endow the world with a definitive, meaningful foundation and history with a definitive finality - even if it meant the suspension of history in some kind of millennium. To put it less eschatologically, the task was to come to terms with the 'contingent' or at least marginalize it to the point where it became a *quantité négligeable* – be it through the self-assured positing of a new coherence through its evocation via new aesthetic technologies or, on the other hand, the consciously regressive resuscitation of national and finally racist characteristics as the hard criterion of 'homogeneity' – i.e. the *vö1kisch* variation.

This strategy of dealing with contingency is the point of convergence of the various options in the dominant discourse of classical modernity – despite their considerable differences in content and irreconcilable political differences. There are also overlaps between the various political, social, philosophical and aesthetic positions within this discourse which lead to a structural similarity across the varying formulations of the various problems and solutions. These congruences did not emerge

only at the stage of the ideological sharpening of these positions at the end of the 1920s, as has often been argued (König, 1961: 105) but are located within the deep structure of the discourse. To state this more pointedly: the options within the dominant discourse of modernity with their substantive and political differences are, in relation to modernity as defined above and as regards their way of stating the problem, their expectations of possible outcomes and the structure of their proffered solutions, virtually interchangeable. The theoretically decisive dichotomy within the discourse of modernity of the 1920s is therefore not the one between 'right' and 'left' or 'conservative' and 'progressive', but between positions and statements which are led by the structure of their discourse necessarily towards the resolution of contingency and those which aim at something which we could call contingency tolerance; and that as a social regulative of contingency management would exclude in principle any absolutist solutions.

Notes

1. Tendenzen der Zwanziger Jahre. Catalogue of an exhibition, Berlin, 1977.
2. Detlev Peukert, too, regards the concept of 'classical modernity' useful for the 'characterization of a whole sociocultural epoch'. See Peukert (1987: 11).
3. Further to the term 'exceptional situation' see Boldt (1972: 343-76).

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