

Sociology and the Diagnosis of the Times or: The Reflexivity of Modernity

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Attempting to orient oneself according to history while it is happening would be like trying to hold on to the waves during a shipwreck. (Löwith, 1960: 163)

The subject is not only inexhaustible, but also indeterminate, because it mutates as soon as it is conceived. Situations from past history that have produced their event and no longer exist can be considered completed. One's personal situation has the stimulating feature that its thought still determines what will become of it. (Jaspers, 1978: 5)

The temporalization of social self-descriptions and the perception of rapid social change presumes above all the distinction between conservative and progressive tendencies. Conservatives begin with disappointment, progressives end with disappointment, but all of them suffer from the times and agree on that much. The crisis becomes general. In the limiting case, the description of society shrivels down to a 'definition of the situation'. Even in the case of unambiguous data, the latter can always be constructed controversially. (Luhmann, 1987a: 167)

POSTmodernISM

Situational analyses that seek to make a diagnosis of the times are necessarily prone to a variety of risks in the age of 'risk society' (Klages, 1966; Jøas, 1988). In itself, the literary genre of the 'diagnosis of the times' is certainly no privilege of sociology as such; instead, it possesses a long tradition of its own in intellectual history. That history is expressed both in the various philosophical and culture-critical attempts to read the 'character of the times', and in the literary, aesthetic and journalistic reflections on the conceptually amorphous and often whimsical 'spirit of the times' (cf. Pfannkuch, 1962; Müller, 1986; Hofmann, 1986). With its self-characterization as type of 'contemporary study' (König, 1987: 92ff; Schelsky, 1979: 441) whose relationship to history has remained the source of a variety of controversies, modern socio-

logy has focused on the present from the beginning. In pursuing this claim, it also entered into open competition with the interpretative potential of a philosophical, literary and historical diagnosis of the times that feels itself indebted to the experiences and horizon of expectations of European modernity.¹

It is this competitive situation which involved sociology early on in the continuing 'battle of the faculties', and which has guaranteed not just a specialized but also a broader interest in the works of its most important representatives. This is not to suggest that this public interest over the past hundred years in the diagnostic potential of sociology has been characterized by a positive concern. The often controversial character of this concern rather suggests that the project of a genuinely *sociological* diagnosis of the times indicates a series of risks and specific points of friction that characterize the genre as such and simultaneously should be made partly responsible for its dubious cognitive status in our discipline. Thus these external disputes over the experience and truth content of sociological attempts to determine the 'character of the times' always shift back to an internal questioning of sociology's own academic self-concept and its specific disciplinary identity. For those disputes concern in essence the precarious relationship of modern sociology to the problem of the *temporality* of its empirical reference, to the *interpretation* of the data gathered by it as a meaningful whole, to a corresponding stylistic and rhetorical *representation* of its interpretations, a representation reflecting its own literary content, and finally to the *orientation function* and the *relevance* of its pronouncements *to action* in a broader public and political space.

The notoriously recurrent 'sociologist-bashing' within this struggle over the 'public interpretation of being' (Heidegger; cf. Mannheim, 1982: 334ff) derives in large part from this specific claim to an 'opinion leadership' in diagnosing the times, as asserted by prominent members of our discipline in public, and this becomes clear when one examines the relevant literature more closely. Nonetheless, Arnold Gehlen's (1963: 313) assessment from the early 1960s, that the period of 'key attitudes' was irredeemably past and the current 'postmodern' confirmation of this diagnosis (Lyotard, 1979; Welsch, 1987) represent more than a purely docile retreat of the discipline from the project of formulating comprehensive interpretative schemata for the epoch, and from the corresponding consciousness of the present. For the talk of 'indeterminacy as character of the times' (Gehlen, 1957: 89ff; Schelsky, 1979: 440) or of a 'new

perplexity' (Habermas, 1985a) attempts to express a quasi-epochal experience with diagnostic means. This suggests both a break in the continuity of the consciousness of modernity and also the existence of a period of 'transition' to new structures of sociation and a corresponding cultural self-concept. If the oft-expressed suspicion should prove true that the always precarious reciprocal relationship between the 'socio-structural' descriptions of *modernity* and the 'cultural' descriptions of *modernism* have completely parted company (Bell, 1976; Vester, 1985; Brunkhorst, 1988), then we would at least have some grounds for an understanding of why many representatives of current German sociology confront the philosophical, literary and aesthetic proclamations of the age of *post-modernity* with irritation and lack of understanding.

Are we actually confronting a 'break' within 'modernity' here, or should we not perhaps proceed from the assumption of a contemporary incompatibility of 'two cultures' and the discourses describing them? This incompatibility need not exclude in principle the possibility of a future reciprocal translation of the diverse dimensions of experience expressed in the two discourses. I should like to supplement this consideration, to which I shall later return, with the remark that in the literature I evaluated for my topic the supposition is often expressed that the aesthetic-cultural sphere has been distinguished vis-a-vis sociocultural descriptions over and over again by a *head start* or a 'preadaptive advance' (Luhmann, 1985: 20). In this view, philosophy, art and literature often anticipate and reflect modern styles of thought, whose sociocultural correlates are not clearly perceived until a later period. Why should we hastily foreclose such a possibility for an adequate understanding of the current 'character of the times'? The concept of 'modernity', fundamental to the constitution of European sociology (see Berger, 1988), was also anticipated in a discourse on the *philosophy of history* and *aesthetics*, before it was able to attain the suggestive power of a socio-structural description of reality for a later academic sociology (Koselleck, 1959, 1977, 1987; Jauss, 1965, 1971, 1983; Martini, 1965; Schneider, 1971; Gumbrecht, 1978; Habermas, 1981, 1985a).

Even though, with respect to the phenomenon of 'postmodernism', there is truth in Luhmann's (1987b: 28) impression 'that in the current situation the description of society is underdeveloped', there also seems to be a great need far beyond the borders of our field for diagnosis of the times in general, and in particular for a

specifically sociological diagnosis. At least this impression is conveyed by the numerous journalistic reactions to the publication of Ulrich Beck's book on *Risk Society* (1986/1992). The overwhelming majority of commentators explicitly welcomed the return of German sociology, or of one of its professional representatives, to the grand tradition of a sociological diagnosis of the present, also praising the courage expressed in such attitude (Dörre, 1987; Hitzler and Wolf, 1988; Honneth, 1988; Joas, 1988; Mackensen, 1988; Seibt, 1988). Let us recall that Jürgen Habermas had pointed out some years ago that *any emphatic claim to such a diagnosis would have to choose between the Scylla of a 'popular synthesis' of inferior quality as social science and the Charybdis of tendentious 'ideology planning with the means of linguistic policy'*. And had he not therefore contented himself much more modestly with gathering mere keywords on the 'intellectual situation of the times' as part of a large-scale interdisciplinary undertaking (Habermas, 1979)? Has an over-extravagant cultural modernism and the aesthetic and philosophical proclamation of the rise of a 'postmodern age' made the 'contemporary spirit' so insecure that even sociology and its specific interpretative potential for a 'definition of the situation' have become presentable to a broad public, despite the sociologist-bashing of recent years? And if so, considering the bitter experiences of the past hundred years, should a sociology that views itself as an academic discipline indulge this need at all? And finally, what are the opportunities as well as the risks of such an undertaking?

So as not to fall victim to the currently prevailing *Zeitgeist* and yet give an answer to these questions, I should like to discuss a number of older sociological diagnoses as examples to provide *historical distance*. In that way, I shall not only reconstruct a *history of the consciousness of modern sociology*, but also illuminate a few peculiarities of the genre of 'diagnosis of the times'. The specific experience of historical temporality that is expressed in this 'history of consciousness' will also provide an indication of the type of *discomfort with life* to which the genealogy of the diagnostic 'project' as such attempts to provide an answer. The fact, however, that this is indissolubly linked to the 'project of modernity' itself may be seen as another indicator that the claim and ability to perform a 'diagnosis of the present' cannot be external to modern sociology or 'added on from outside', because those abilities and claims are a paradigmatic foundation of the constitution of sociology.

In that sense, the topic 'sociology and diagnosis of the times' has two central dimensions that must be differentiated. First, it appeals to the self-description of modern sociology as a *contemporary study* and to its own diagnostic potential. Second, modern sociology itself is a phenomenon that is to be determined as part of a diagnosis of the times. For its part, it shares all the qualities of the *Zeitgeist* and can therefore be made the object of a reflexive 'diagnosis of the times', or more precisely, a genuine *sociology of sociology*. We shall see that a sociology conceiving of itself essentially as a 'study of the present' is characterized and affected by that 'paradox of time' which is the basis of the modern consciousness of a specifically *historical experience of the times*. In that sense it also exposes the project of a *scientific diagnosis of the times* to the opportunities and hazards of a *paradoxical description of the present*.

Modernity

The fact that the period between 1750 and 1850 represents a threshold in which the actual breakthrough of modernity occurs within European social and cultural history can be considered the consensus today between historiography reflecting on its own historical foundations, aesthetics, literary hermeneutics and a sociology of knowledge that analyses the development of historical-political semantics with categories from social theory (Jauss, 1965, 1983; Koselleck, 1972, 1979, 1987; Luhmann, 1980–89; Hüther, 1988). Reinhard Koselleck (1972) in particular, and many authors in *Fundamental Historical Ideas (Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe)*, the lexicon of social history he co-edits, have been able to present this time span convincingly in their studies of intellectual history as a 'saddle period'. That is, it is a period in which a far-reaching transformation of the meaning of classical topoi has occurred, to such an extent

that old words have gained new meanings, which no longer require any more translations as we approach the present. Corresponding concepts bear a double face; retrospectively they signify social and political matters that are no longer comprehensible to us without a critical commentary. Prospectively, and thus facing us, they have gained meanings that can be explained, but also appear be directly comprehensible. Conceptuality and conceivability have coincided for us since then. (Koselleck, 1972: XV).

But corresponding studies in the philosophy of history, art and

literature also prove the period between 1750 and 1850 to be a threshold of epochs, which was opened by the appearance of the two *Discourses* by Rousseau, and is clearly delimited, even chronologically, by the aesthetic theory of Baudelaire which assimilates the failed revolution of 1848. Within these hundred years, the specific experience of modernity was articulated, a modernity experienced by contemporaries as the real beginning of a new era as distinguished from 'early modernity' dominated by the Renaissance and Reformation (Kamlah, 1957; Walder, 1967; Koselleck, 1977, 1987).

On the semantic level, this consciousness of a new era is expressed in the formation of a specifically 'modern' conceptuality, which captures the increasingly *accelerating* transformation of experience in its idiosyncrasy. The lexicon *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* lists as criteria for this conceptual transformation: a tendency towards *democratization* in the course of the gradual broadening of fields of expression previously shaped by status-specific factors; a strict *temporalization* of the categorical semantic elements; finally, the emerging *ideologizability* and the intensifying *politicization* of many concepts, which at the same time exhibit a novel reflexivity of philosophic-historical visions of the future onto the level of linguistic articulation.

The relationship of the concept to that which is conceived reverses itself, shifting in favor of linguistic anticipations intended to shape the future. In that way, concepts arise which refer far beyond that which is empirically redeemable, without sacrificing their political or social implications. Far from it. (Koselleck, 1972: XVIII)

The prerequisite for this opportunity to form an ideological and utopian consciousness, the *differentia specifica* of which is measured according to Karl Mannheim (1969: 169 ff) by its particular reference to the present is the notion of history as a collective singular and a collective subject. This replaced the theological ideas and subdivisions of the historical process, predominant until well into the seventeenth century, and thereby enthroned time itself as the actual motive 'force' of history. With this radical temporalization of the historical consciousness there also occurs a renunciation of a preordained *Heilsgeschichte*, and a 'self-assertion' of the modern era (Blumenberg, 1988: 135ff), expressed in the revealing of an *open future* and the increasing importance of *temporal*

concepts such as 'progress', 'development', 'crisis', 'revolution' and 'planning' (see Salomon, 1957; Sombart, 1965; Koselleck and Meier, 1975). The increasing consciousness of one's own historical perspective and contextuality, the self-description of the present as a 'transitional time', and the shortening of the time spans in which a particular epochal consciousness is articulated, can all be seen as indices of a continually accelerating transformation of experience and a new experience of time, which ultimately reduces historical time to a succession of 'points in time' and raises the episodic nature of their appearance and transformation to the actual criterion of historical consciousness (Luhmann, 1980: 261ff).

The concentration of historical time on the 'shock' and the 'event' of *revolution* reveals a more profound relationship between thought in the philosophy of history and the aesthetic and poetological descriptions of *modernity*. As an *evocation of the episodic and the surprising breach of continuity*, that relationship has bound the artistic avant-garde movements of modernity since early Romanticism to the project of a permanent revolution in a formal sense, but without confining it in the explicitness of a corresponding political content. The irritation which each newly appearing avant-garde movement has tended to provoke among politically 'conservative' as well as 'progressive' observers can probably be viewed as a necessary consequence of this ambiguity in the concept of the revolutionary itself (Bohrer, 1989). At the same time, this perception of something categorically 'new' within a secularized view of history points to the necessary boom which the 'spirit of the times' has enjoyed in the consciousness of an enlightened public since the French Revolution of 1789. By valorizing the revolutionary and episodic into a perennial 'now', the present itself finally becomes the object of an 'epochal' self-description. It is not supposed to differ formally from the description of great eras or past epochs (Pfannkuch, 1962: 116) — except that now the *Zeitgeist*, to the extent that it refers to the present spirit and not that handed down by history, has also received the meaning of a 'prescriptive category for future-related action in the present'; one must follow it from now on — or perish (Müller, 1986: 983f)! And even for a philosophy of history that feels obligated to the 'world spirit', not just the 'spirit of the times' and the moods and emotional wavering of 'public opinion' expressed in it, it can only be true apodictically that it 'captures its times in thoughts' — or risks being declared irrelevant (Hegel, 1970: 26).

If the 'spirit of the times has gained control of philosophy' since Hegel (Habermas, 1985a: 26), then, conversely, the *crisis character* of an epoch that has abandoned itself to the whims of this specifically modern-age 'spirit' becomes clear. With the lost perception of times of differing duration and of long-term processes in favour of an emphatic expression of the moment, every attempt at a diagnosis of the times runs the danger of being trapped by brief and superficial fads, so that it must immediately factor in its own depreciation, in the sense of its own inherent obsolescence. In Baudelaire's theory of the *transitorily beautiful* and in Flaubert's poetics of *fragmented perception*, it is precisely this radical temporality and transitoriness which is elevated to the subject of an aesthetic and philosophical-historical experience of modernity. It attempts to avoid the aporias of historicism without sacrificing the empirical substance which underlies it. Thus the literary process of modernism, beginning in about the middle of the nineteenth century, is characterized by

the aesthetics of a *modernité* which is set off only from itself in the shock-like experience of the new, producing in that way its own *antiquité* and ultimately transforming historicism into an aestheticism that has free reign over all the past in the scope of the 'imaginary museum'. (Jauss, 1983: 102; cf. also 113ff)

A characteristic feature of this semantic transformation of modernity in aesthetics and the philosophy of history is the significance which accrues henceforth to the *fashionable* as the real *paradigm of modernity*.² To the extent that the concept of the beautiful now designates only a fleeting moment, modernity no longer determines itself in opposition to other epochs, but rather by an immanent relation to the 'eternal', which causes every modern work of art to appear to be simultaneously the anticipation of a 'transition' and the birth of a future 'classicism'. The coincidence of 'fashion' (*mode*) and *éternité* is in that sense already announced in the concept of modernity (*modernité*) itself: 'Modernity is the passing, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and immovable' (Baudelaire, 1972: 403).

There is thus a basis in the programme of aesthetic modernity itself for the heterogeneous variety of artistic trends, as well as the avant-garde aesthetic and artistic movements that succeed each other ever more quickly, and finally threaten to nullify themselves and thus the project of an autonomous sphere of art that has been

becoming more differentiated ever since the eighteenth century. Modernism has not only inspired the genre of *cultural critique*, following Nietzsche's scorn at the lack of style and substance of the 'moderns', but has also motivated the attempts at an *overcoming of modernity* which continue to this day. The perception of an *indeterminacy as character of the times* is in that sense not peculiar to contemporary consciousness, but characterizes all of aesthetic modernity as a 'loss of epochal unity' (Warning, 1982: 481). The experience of this very privation compared to past epochs of art and literary history is what distinguishes it as something specifically 'modern'. At the same time — and this is the thesis I shall seek to establish in what follows — that experience is the starting point in intellectual history for the developing project, from the beginning of this century, of a genuine *diagnosis of the times based on the sociology of knowledge and culture*.³ Here, the cultural diversity of modernity, both as simultaneity and succession, sensed by the classical sociologists writing in the German language, can be illustrated prototypically with two different 'classical' starting points, both of which were committed to the conceptual determination of this specifically modern 'perplexity'. It can be shown paradigmatically in Georg Simmel's philosophy of culture how a sociological reconstruction of the social modernization process can be connected with self-descriptions of aesthetic-cultural modernism in such a way that the *general* signature of the modern era becomes clear from the individual manifestations and forms of experience of modernity as part of a *synchronic* analysis. On the other hand, within a *diachronic* analysis, attempts at a description of modernity can also be understood as stages of a historical and political process in which the perspectival limitations of the descriptions of partial aspects and concrete analyses of the situation are increasingly nullified in favour of the formation of more global perspectives and 'thought platforms'. This is the intellectual claim of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, which, following on Ernst Troeltsch's (1922) analysis of historicism, feels committed to the possibility in principle of a *new cultural synthesis*.

Snapshots *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*

1. Simmel reflects the radical rupture that characterizes Baudelaire's consciousness of time and aesthetic experience, against the background of a theory of social differentiation and the

developed money economy which attempts to determine the effects of this sociocultural modernization process on the stylization of modern personality forms and urban ways of life. The gauge of the developmental level of this modernization process is not just the number of ways of life or 'social circles' in which the individual is able to participate, but also the extent to which the abstractive and universalizing power of money has developed itself within the overall economic and cultural process of society (see Lichtblau, 1986, 1988: 37ff). According to Simmel, the significance of money for a diagnosis of modernity lies in 'representing in itself' the economic relativity of objects, as well as in the circumstance that it most purely reveals the character of social life as a conglomerate of innumerable 'interactions'. Thus money is also the formula of a relativistic worldview, according to which 'things find their meaning in each other' (Simmel, 1922: 96-9). By symbolizing the strictly rational and process character of social life, money also becomes the code for a specific experience of modernity, which finds expression in the most varied cultural and social manifestations. In this way, Simmel contrasts the fragmentary character of any knowledge of reality, to the extent it is due to the specialized approach of modern sociology, with the programme of an *aesthetic pantheism* that harbours the hope, based on the *symbolic* nature of social life and the objective world shaped by modern culture, 'that a plummet can be dropped from any point on the surface of existence . . . into the depths of the soul, that all the most banal externalities are ultimately connected by directional lines with the deepest decisions on the meaning and style of life' (Simmel, 1957: 231).

Simmel's descriptive categories for the socio-structural and the cultural modernization process here are identical: the *distance* in the relationships of individuals to one another and to things caused by the modern money economy does more than bring about the 'contact anxiety' and the 'hyperesthesia' of the contemporary person. It simultaneously explains the 'long-distance effects' or better, the 'attraction' possessed by the non-present, the *fragmentary*, the mere hint, the *aphoristic*, the 'undeveloped artistic styles' and the *symbolic* (Simmel, 1896: 214ff, 1922: 538f). And the *tempo* of modern life, accelerated by the circulation of commodities and money, should be held responsible not only for the *alternation of fashions* and the *multiplicity of styles*, but also for the articulation of a temporal feeling that seems to lack any fixed time scale at all.

It is capable of grasping the 'dynamics of the modern age' only in the form of an 'absolute change — the *species aeternitatis* the wrong way around', for which 'here' has completely vanished (Simmel, 1922: 582). Despite their literary character, Simmel's 'Snapshots *sub specie aeternitatis*', published in the journal *Jugend*, are therefore deeply correlated with his *Philosophy of Money*. The 'general relativity of the world' is expressed both in money as an *actus purus*, that is, the 'vehicle of a movement in which all that is not in motion is utterly eradicated', and in a corresponding consciousness of time, which can thematize the present only as a *form of transition* and *non-duration* (1922: 582-4; cf. Frisby, 1981: 102ff, 1985: 38ff).

This specifically *modern* experience of temporality finds its most succinct expression in Simmel's analysis of *fashion* (cf. Lenk, 1986). On the one hand, fashion's permanent change displays the 'degree of blunting of nervous reactions' that characterizes metropolitan people and their 'sensitivity to difference' which can be only stimulated by the shock-like appearance of new fashions (Simmel, 1902: 99, 1983: 33). On the other, this 'specifically modern fickleness in the areas of taste, styles, attitudes and relationships' is more than a mere expression of the 'lack of anything definitive in the centre of the soul' (Simmel, 1922: 551). It is simultaneously the counterpart of a withering of faith which has completely lost the certainty of any firm coordination of human existence:

That is why the reasons for fashion's dominating consciousness so strongly today include the fact that the great, lasting convictions have increasingly lost strength. The fleeting and changeable elements of existence gain that much more freedom of action as a result. (Simmel, 1983: 35)

2. 'Is there knowledge of that which is flowing, becoming reality. A knowledge of the creative deed?' (Mannheim, 1969: 97). With this question, Mannheim connects with Simmel's definition of the present as a 'form of transition' and of 'non-duration', conceding a very special significance to the sociological analysis of the present for describing the character of the times. Previously only philosophical efforts at a genuine diagnosis of the times enjoyed such significance. Mannheim conceives here of the modern form of the sociology of knowledge shaped by the work of Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch and Max Scheler not only as the heir of the enlightened tradition of ideology criticism, but also as an *aid to the*

self-consciousness and broadening of humanity, which intensifies the *crisis of modernity* culminating in a 'radical revision of all the particular possibilities of being which previously presented themselves as absolutes', in order thereby to prepare the way for a specifically *new sense of life* (Mannheim, 1929: 820, 822). His own investigations in the sociology of knowledge are by no means aimed at proving to a specialist audience the context-dependency of the competing validity claims expressed in the intellectual tendencies of his times. Instead, they are a specific *situational analysis*, which asserts the insight into the necessarily *particular* and *perspectival* character of any 'contextually-determined thought' as the real cause of the 'crisis' of modern thinking and at the same time as the necessary condition for overcoming it.

The specific temporal consciousness that is expressed in this sociological description of modernity receives its depth dimension from the *diachronic* form of the analysis by which Mannheim describes the distinctive character of his time. Mannheim not only correlates the structure and process of the various intellectual tendencies that have been in conflict over the 'public interpretation of being' since the decay of a unified worldview in the modern era with specific socio-structural findings such as *generational layering* and the various 'pure types' of *competition*, which in his view also clarify the constitutive meaning of the social process for the *aspect structure of thought* (Mannheim, 1969: 231ff). His theory of *relationism* and the *sliding-cognitive basis* (1969: 262), derived from an analysis of the developmental logic of historical-political knowledge, additionally clarifies that a cognitive sociological analysis that starts from the context-dependency and perspectivism of the different systems of ideas has overcome historicism simply by virtue of seeing more than mere coincidence at work in the historical succession of individual intellectual tendencies and the intensification of the present-day constellations in the direction of a decisive overall situation. In other words: the *trend character* of 'modern' thinking, the *concentration processes* and the formation of continually renewed *cognitive platforms* on a higher level of integration each time are what characterize a dialectical process of *polarization* and *synthesis formation* where an absolute synthesis is no longer possible. Instead, there is an *absolute situation* and a corresponding opportunity for knowledge which can only be taken advantage of by a self-reflective and therefore radicalized sociology of knowledge (Mannheim, 1929: 822, 1969: 132).

The scholarly project of a situational analysis taking this *overall socio-intellectual constellation* as its object was explicitly characterized by Mannheim (1969: 82, 132) as a *sociological diagnosis of the times*, with the objective of 'offering the most comprehensive view of the totality attainable at the time'. At the same time, his writings from the late 1920s make it clear that the diagnosis fitting for his times is indebted to the experience of an epochally significant *historical moment*, which demands a quite fundamental decision as to whether the continued existence of the form of historical-political semantics that shaped the modern era is not being called into question. Even at this juncture, Mannheim's diagnosis of his times anticipates the possibility of a fundamentally new, *post-historic* age, which found its concrete bases in the impending triumph of the fascist mass movements, as well as the world domination of the 'American consciousness' looming on the horizon. Italian fascism, shaped by George Sorel's ideas of the *social myth*, rejected any concept of history as a pure construction and fiction oriented along the paradigm of a 'historical temporality' and replaced it by the mythical image of an *ahistorical moment of political activism* (Mannheim, 1969: 119–24). In contrast, the *American consciousness* is distinguished by its orientation towards the paradigm of a *technical and organizational mastery of reality* which finds its appropriate intellectual counterpart in a *sociology indifferent to any historically inspired view of the times*:

Organizing events in contemporary history on the basis of a utopian-inspired social philosophy of history, which our last few centuries worked at, disappears here once again: qualitatively differentiated time becomes a homogeneous space, where type structures that can be fixed for all times make a breakthrough (although in different mixtures). (1969: 218)

In the description of this unique constellation in world history Mannheim (1969: 124) himself follows the contemporary experience of history as a momentary situation, which, like Carl Schmitt's theory of the state of emergency, adheres to the methodological maxim that it is precisely in such intensified extreme historical situations that a deeper insight into the overall structure of the historical process can be obtained (Schmitt, 1934: 11f). Ernst Robert Curtius objected to Mannheim's diagnosis of the times that the moment is precisely what makes one short-sighted, so that he believed he could dismiss Mannheim's sociology of knowledge from the standpoint of

a traditional humanistic historiography, but this overlooks in a way one could almost call tragic the prophetic core one must concede to Mannheim's sociological analysis from 1929 in consideration of what was to come (Curtius, 1929; von Martin, 1930). Within a *sociological history of consciousness* that analysis acquires the significance of the anticipation of a new temporal experience, characterized not only by the loss of utopian consciousness and the 'will to history', but also by a completely new determination of the 'ideological' and the 'political' in an *age of technology* and *mass society* (Mannheim, 1969: 224f).

Posthistoire

During his exile in London after the National Socialist seizure of power, Mannheim himself drew the consequences from their *Gleichschaltung* (forced regimentation), and designated the decisive world-historical situation he had described in 1929 as a constellation that would henceforth belong irremediably to the *past*. Motivated by the insight that the 'developmental plan which even the last generation believed it had identified is beginning to lose its public credit' (Mannheim, 1937: 100) and that the idea of progress is consequently becoming questionable, Mannheim had already noted in 1937 the retreat of utopian consciousness back to tying down the present. This was accompanied by a general *fragmentation of the cognitive basis* and a growing *lack of any worldview*, 'as could be expected only of the simple-minded in more solid societies' (1937: 105). The project of a *scientific diagnosis of the times* had thereby become questionable because of subjective insecurity over the 'future shape' of modern society, as well as the objective indeterminacy of 'social forces' themselves, 'which always point in several often contradictory directions' (1937: 100). Mannheim nevertheless takes the risk of outlining the character of this 'post-historical' age. Characteristic of it in his view is the emergence of a specifically *modern social engineering* which now takes the place of the traditional education of people. Mannheim (1937: 108–14) sees the foundation of this engineering in both 'American mass propaganda' as a specifically 'democratic pattern for influencing the masses', and in the forms of social *planning* and *direction* created by the 'Russian enlightenment dictatorship'.

With this 'vital necessity' of modern social engineering within an industrial mass society also sketched out in his later writings (Mannheim, 1952, 1958), Mannheim writes the prelude to a theme

which has advanced to become a central topos of the sociological diagnoses of the times in the 1950s and the early 1960s. Works of this kind by Hans Freyer, Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Schelsky share the concept of an *industrial society* that has conjured up a world-historical situation which 'is universal in the absolute sense' (Freyer, 1955: 251) and displays the 'end of the type of high culture formation that had been built up since 3500 BC' (Gehlen, 1957: 88). The industrial revolution that had been developing since about 1800 is even characterized in these writings as an *absolute cultural threshold*, the meaning of which could only be compared with the prehistoric transition of humankind to a settled form of existence at the onset of the neolithic age (Freyer, 1955: 81; Gehlen, 1957: 87f; Schelsky, 1979: 439). 'Industrial culture', which owes its existence to an autonomized technical progress, is claimed at the same time to mark the end of a 'cultural age', the social basis of which was the old European 'master race' (*Herrenmenschentum*), and now that it has abdicated, previous history is said to have entered the stage of a *posthistoire* (Gehlen, 1957: 88).

This concept, borrowed from A.A. Cournot's conception of history and later utilized by Arnold Gehlen as a topos for contemporary diagnosis designates the state of a *cultural crystallization*, which appears in Gehlen's view in an epoch 'whenever the possibilities contained within it have all developed in their fundamental aspects' (Gehlen, 1963: 321, 323). The experience of a 'posthistoire' thus does not comprise either the end of the history of events nor of world history in the sense of a planetary exploitation of the natural resources of the world and the related distributional struggles. It is rather a way of writing off our prior cultural tradition, which is intended to reveal the end of the great philosophical debates and the 'grand key attitudes' in the sense of a convincing 'worldview', a process accelerated by the 'nihilistic chaos' of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1963: 312ff).

Gehlen's subtle diagnostic analysis of this 'cultural crystallization' anticipates many motifs which reappear in the current debates on 'postmodernism'. Beyond that, it clarifies that the level of debate in the early 1960s with regard to an analysis of the present that would link the socio-structural designations with cultural descriptions had already set up standards from which a stimulating effect can come, even today. Gehlen's interest in the fate of the 'soul in the age of technology' not only sensitized him to an enhanced perception of the 'sociopsychological problems of industrial society' (Gehlen,

1957), but also to a sociological analysis of the subtle intertwining of modern subjectivism and hedonism in the various forms of contemporary culture. His description of a 'highly dynamic society with pluralistic principles' (1963: 324) thus finds its counterpart in an impressive analysis of modern painting, which is seen by him as an important indicator for a determination of the 'change in cultural climate' that has occurred since the turn of the century (Gehlen, 1960: 16). There, Gehlen attempts to demonstrate in a study of the sociology of art oriented along the *theme of pictorial rationality*, that even in the field of the visual arts, all 'imaginable subjects had been played out' by 1900 at the latest, and that from then on all 'thematic possibilities' were also exhausted (1960: 41). The rapidly alternating avant-garde movements since then, one outdoing the next, despite the theatrically staged *vividness of appearances* could therefore not deceive anyone as to the *rigidity of fundamental decisions*, on which this 'shut down dialectics' or if you prefer, 'eternal recurrence of the same', was based (Gehlen, 1963: 322). This is, instead, an 'expansion in place' (322) and a 'posthistoire' which announces itself in the visual arts as a 'type of revival of all past works' (Gehlen, 1960: 48).

Gehlen's *Zeit-Bilder* (Images of the times) feel obligated to the insight that there can no longer be any Archimedean point today 'from which one could see everything', and thus in particular, 'no philosophy in the old sense' (Gehlen, 1963: 323). Additionally, however, this very *indeterminacy as signature of the times* could have as its basis a condition of reality 'which to this point only certain modern painters were capable of dealing with' (Gehlen, 1957: 89). On the other hand, they are the symptom of a differentiation that has become necessary in the concept of *occidental rationalism* itself, which had to be freed from its 'fatalistic monosyllabism' in favour of a 'type of divalence' that would henceforth leave it to an audience that had become sensitized to Spengler's 'decadence dogma' to decide 'in what areas it will definitely allow this rationalization, and where it will not' (Gehlen, 1957: 92). In this connection, Gehlen also pointed out the function a sociology oriented towards diagnosis of the times could perform within such a rationalization process that had become *reflexive*, namely, that of a 'self-regulation of the social-historical process in the sense of the most effective and easiest, or in any case, the optimal *processing of one's own data*' (1957: 92). And at the same time he drew attention to the risks that characterize such a reflection process as permanent condition:

The event will . . . in the long run, be disappointment-filled, highly risky, even bloody. But cultural criticism, which, perhaps unavoidably, still proceeds quite emotionally in its current stage and which echoes, somewhat monotonously, the traditional protest against a degree of rationalization widely felt to be excessive, could some day perform useful work in its service. (1957: 92f)

The Paradox of Time

With this description of the present as a *transitional period*, or a type of 'interference or mutual interpenetration between a civilization period of the old style and an epoch of a purely new type', which finds expression in a *cultural syncretism* of a 'mixture of all styles, forms and feelings' (Gehlen, 1957: 84, 88), Gehlen found the decisive keywords that to this day determine the discussion among those engaged in cultural critique or diagnosis of the times. One can think of the question Schelsky raised in the late 1960s as to the possibility of *institutionalizing permanent reflection*, an issue that concerned him until his death (Schelsky, 1979: 448; Lepenies, 1985: 418ff), or of the *new-perplexity* described by Jürgen Habermas (1985b: 139ff) in the crisis of the welfare state he diagnosed, or of the rupture diagnosed by Daniel Bell between the *socio-structural modernization process* deriving from the spirit of Protestant ethics and a rudderless, hedonistic *cultural modernism* (Bell, 1976), or finally of the current debate on *postmodernism* (Lyotard, 1979; Vester, 1984, 1985; Huyssen and Scherpe, 1986; Koslowski et al., 1986; Kamper and van Reijen, 1987; Welsch, 1987, 1988; Brunkhorst, 1988; Featherstone, 1988; Kemper, 1988). In none of these cases is there any evidence to be found to suggest that the diagnostic consciousness expressed in Gehlen's work would need to be revised substantially in view of the present. Indeed, after the collapse of the dialectical utopias of progress that were re-actualized in the revolts of 1968 and the concomitant loss of convincing power on the part of the 'grand narratives' (Lyotard), I should like to assert that today we once again find a widespread consciousness of the type that was already dealt with around 1960. Consider the key phrases of the debates during the past twenty years, such as 'late capitalism', 'post-industrial society', 'consumer society', 'leisure society', 'informal society', 'information society', 'communications society', 'risk society' or, recently, 'cultural society'. These can hardly be taken as indicators of a 'transformation of epochs', which would have to be occurring almost yearly, but at best as descriptions of *structural aspects* of contemporary society, and one could apply to their plausibility the same words already used by Helmut Schelsky

(1979: 442) in a similar situation in 1960: 'So many theories, so many truths!' The diagnostic substance of these and other labels and the 'observations' expressed in them must be understood in a different sense than that of a *chronological succession*, and points to the necessity of a *paradoxical description of the present* which would be in a position to account for this *complex* and *overdetermined* 'character of the times'.

I should first like to address a peculiarity of 'post-ism' which seems to have gone underexposed in the discussion to date of this sociological topos: its logical irrefutability. If one reconstructs the history of consciousness in modernity strictly with regard to the experience of temporality occurring in it, then one must necessarily reach the conclusion that there is indeed no discernible new experience of temporality to date which could escape the descriptions of the present that have been handed down to us in the 'dialectics of the modern age'. The core argument of the theoreticians of 'posthistoire' or 'postmodernity', the view that all the melodies have by now been played out, hits the mark in precisely this respect. Even the 'neo-Enlightened' actualization of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century utopias based on the philosophy of history represents only a recourse to the 'imaginary museum' of already known historical experiences, and in that sense it confirms the thesis of 'posthistoire' and of the 'postmodern' arbitrariness or revival of all previous descriptions of the present (Gumbrecht, 1985). But even the sociologists' insistence on the persistence of modernity in the present contains only a reformulation of the thesis of 'cultural crystallization' within an age of 'posthistoire'. To clear up a widespread misunderstanding, even the more precise concept of an aesthetically articulated 'postmodernism' originally and essentially represents only a negation of the avant-garde artistic movements from the turn of the century and their emphatically expressed claim to a radical 'renewal', now dismissed by the plea for a fundamental eclecticism and revival of all previous stylistic tendencies.⁴ In this respect, 'postmodernity' is not an antithesis to the 'concept of modernity in the sociological tradition' (Berger, 1988: 224), but rather its correlate, or better, an expression of one and the same cultural *crystallization*.

Even Ulrich Beck's courageous attempt 'to track down the word "post", alternatively called "late" or "trans" ' in order 'to understand the meanings that the historical development of modernity has given to this word over the past two or three decades — especially in

Germany' (Beck, 1986: 12), must not lead us to believe that a new experience of the times is being expressed there. Rather, it confirms the 'legitimacy of the modern era' and the perennial 'self-assertion' of modernity against the particular 'design' of nineteenth-century industrial society. 'Modernity' only creates, in a way already described, its own past in the sense of a 'classical industrial society' which it leaves behind as its own *antiquité* in the course of a 'reflexive' and 'risk'-fraught reconstruction of the latter, without really bringing about the breakthrough to, or better, the birth of a 'new era' that would be different from the 'modern era' per se; for the 'classical' concept of the 'modern era' must be after all categorically identical to that of a 'modernization in reflexivity'.

We are therefore not experiencing 'a transformation of the bases of transformation' today (Beck, 1986: 19) at all, in the sense that the 'project of modernity' was *never* identical to that of 'industrial society'. The latter may change itself, even destroy itself or disappear into thin air, but the modern experience of the times and thus the diagnosis of them remain unchanged in this case too. All this is expressed in the talk of 'cultural crystallization' or 'posthistoire'. And this may be one of the reasons why contemporary sociology has such difficulty in dealing with the concept of the *present*, or better, of a 'diagnosis of the present' that does justice to it; for the present, in Luhmann's (1987a: 167) words, is the *paradox of time*, i.e. 'the excluded *tertium quid* included in time, neither future nor past, but at the same time also the one and the other'. But this is also the decisive basis for a 'foreshortening of the temporal horizons to a "definition of the situation" ' (1987a: 169; cf. Elias, 1983) which characterizes sociology as a 'study of the present', and by its own categorical prerequisites can only be a stage of 'transition' and 'change'! In other words, the present can be understood both as a *past future* and as a *future past*, where only the second characterization unambiguously determines it, since the first formula also includes the 'past present'. But then, *modernity (reflexively)* is also determined as a *future classicism*, that is to say, a *postmodernity!* In regard to the renewal claim of the avant-garde aesthetic movements since the turn of the century, we can thus say with equal justification: 'A work of art is only modern if it was previously postmodern. Viewed in that way, post-modernism does not mean the end of modernism, but rather the situation of its birth, and this situation is constant' (Lyotard, 1982: 140).

I do not care to push the possibilities and impossibilities revealed

in these paradoxical descriptions of the times any further to extremes, although I do not see without further argumentation how this paradoxical nature of time could be done away with by a simple 'interruption of self-referentiality' without conceding the field once again to the ahistorical moment of a mythically oriented political activism (cf. on the contrary, Luhmann, 1987a). We already know from our classics, by the way, that the object of modern sociology is a paradoxical one. Didn't Max Weber already describe the 'paradoxes of rationalization' with impressive turns of phrase in his universal-historical reflections spanning over two and a half thousand years (Weber, 1920: 203ff, 564ff)? With equal justification, I would characterize Simmel's theory of modernity as virtually a *theory of the paradoxical*, which finds expression in his description of the recurrence of the 'indifferent' in money and of economic value as a negation of the 'indifferent necessity' of nature, as well as in his description of the modern romantic form of love as an 'intermediate condition between having and not having' or 'having something that at the same time one does not have' (Simmel, 1922: 3ff, 86ff, 1985: 187, 196ff, 251f; Lichtblau, 1988: 33ff, 83ff).

At this point, however, I should also like to recall the paradoxical situation of modern art as described by Peter Bürger (1983: 195), according to which art decays if the avant-garde claim to sublating it in the practice of life should prove to be realizable, but decays equally as much if this claim is set aside and the traditional separation of art from life practice continues to be accepted as something natural. Finally, let me point to the analysis by Habermas (1985: 152) of the paradoxical nature of the welfare state programme, according to which developed capitalism could survive neither *without* the welfare state nor with its necessary continued expansion, but also to the fundamental paradox of a 'communication paradigm' that lives on contradiction and polemics. Last, but not least, let us recall Luhmann's (1987b: 163) tracing of all these current 'perplexities' to the basic *tautological* or *paradoxical structure* of the self-descriptions of modern society, the analysis of which takes the place, for him, of the 'possibility of a contrary clinging to reason, of defiance, lament and resignation'.

We should, then, take these paradoxical attempts to describe the present seriously and with the necessary pinch of romantic irony required for the intellectual mastery of this situation, we should continue to trace the elements of the modern experience in other structural aspects of our time, without over-hastily describing sociology

as being in 'crisis', or reducing it to the status of a 'study of crisis' and nourishing the related political hopes (see on the other hand, Offe, 1981). A *poetics of sociology* reflecting this 'intellectual situation of the times' could perhaps help favour that distancing which is necessary to be intellectually forearmed against the paradoxical descriptions of modern society and the crisis of conscience that repeatedly flares up in our discipline.⁵

If I may risk a sociological diagnosis of the times myself in this connection and defend it in the outside world, then it would be: indeed, we live in a *paradoxical time*! And if someone were to ask me which current sociological theory I consider the most likely candidate for a 'sociology of postmodernity' or even a 'postmodern sociology', then I would say without hesitation, that in the German case it is the version practised by Luhmann.⁶ If, on the other hand, someone were to ask me what one is to make of all the cheerfulness and merriment of an 'enlightened polytheism' with regard to the *future*, then I would answer with the words of Jacob Taubes (1983: 464f): 'If we do not succeed in constituting a historical concept of history, then the project of modernity cannot be saved from the retreat into an indifferent nature, then a relapse into a mythical mentality is on the agenda. Then it could happen that acherontic powers overwhelm the "Olympus of semblance" on which an enlightened polytheism wishes to settle.'

Translated by Mark Ritter

Notes

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1. Wolf Lepenies (1985, 1986) has described in detail this competitive and complementary relationship between the literary and the sociological analysis of the experience of 'modernity'. For a genealogy of the project of diagnosing modernity and its aporias in philosophy and the humanities, see Habermas (1981, 1985a) and Müller-Armack (1948, 1949).

2. This constitutive relation between the 'fashionable' and the 'modern' was already explicitly emphasized by Karl Gutzkow in 1836, before it was accorded a paradigmatic significance for the analysis of the present by Baudelaire and later by Simmel (Gutzkow, 1910). In this valorization of the fashionable beginning with the

early modern era, Luhmann sees a 'special opportunity for overcoming contingency', which hands over the 'irrationality' of the ephemeral, destined for decay, to the reliability and monotony of a supplier industry that actually operates according to rational criteria. 'What is contingent, capricious, and arbitrary is made bearable by making it disappear' (Luhmann, 1984: 74). Equating the 'fashionable' with the 'modern' was reserved, however, for the nineteenth century and the development of a corresponding aesthetics of the 'sudden' and of 'disappearing'. For a detailed discussion of the phenomenon of fashion, see Bovenschen (1986) and Schwarz (1982, 1987).

3. For that reason, Marshall Berman justly speaks of a *paradoxical unity* or a *unity of disunity* with regard to modernity: 'it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air"' (Berman, 1982: 15).

4. The 'aging of modernity' is identical in this respect to a 'crisis' or a self-negation of the avant-garde conception of art, which now substitutes the 'post-historical' postulate of the *synchronism* of all possible forms of artistic expression for the notion of a *diachronic* succession of different artistic styles. For a discussion of this self-negatory dialectic of avant-garde artistic practice see Bürger (1980, 1983), Lüdke (1976), Jappe (1981), Böhlinger (1985) and Krauss (1985).

5. Such a 'poetics of sociology' could perhaps sensitize us to a more reflective treatment of the paradoxes and fallacies that inevitably occur within a 'study of the present'. It could also draw our attention to the fact that the Procrustean bed of analytical epistemology has not only been called into question for some time by modern logicians and the interdisciplinary triumph of 'second order cybernetics', but also by a metaphorology and discourse analysis that takes the genuine linguistic substance of scientific narratives as its object. I see the starting point for such a 'poetological' self-description of sociology, for instance, in the works of Stein (1963), Nisbet (1969, 1976), Lyman and Scott (1970), Goodwin (1971), Brown (1973, 1977), Greimas (1977), Brown and Lyman (1978), Perman (1978), Lichtblau (1980: 17-97) and Green (1988). The fact that such research initiatives have so far been scarcely recognized in German sociology, much less discussed, says little about the possible fruitfulness of such a perspective.

6. I draw starting points for such a classification, among other sources, from a catalogue of criteria put together by Heinz-Günter Vester (1985: 19ff) for a characterization of postmodern thinking and the attitudes expressed in it. The meaning of the concept of complexity in modern architectural theory and the 'autopoiesis' of the postmodern art business is pointed out by Hannes Böhlinger (1985: 30ff, 111ff). For a few fundamental 'elective affinities' between French 'post-' or 'neostructuralism' and Luhmann's systems theory see also Lichtblau (1980: 248ff).

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