

Yannis Stavrakakis
*Beyond the Certainty Principle: Towards a Political
Reading of the Modern Experience**

The crisis of certainty

An avalanche of recent events has made us realize that the world in which we live is not as safe as we have been used to believe. The image of modern societies as societies which, armored with an absolute certainty guaranteed by scientific discourse, are in a position to control the totality of the real is suffering severe dislocations – which does not necessarily mean, of course, that the hegemony and the importance of science in modern culture is totally undermined. So, what is wrong? What happened to the unqualified optimism promising an unlimited human domination on the totality of the real? Instead of this picture, what is now emerging is the surfacing of an element which, up to now, had been repressed from our perception of reality, a perception which was previously thought to be objective and is now suddenly revealed to be the result of a contingent process of social construction. What can this element be? The most plausible answer seems to be the following: it is the element of uncertainty which now returns to haunt our certainties; it is an element of negativity which returns to dislocate our constructions of social positivity. In other words, what was thought to be impossible is happening in front our very eyes. In Lacanian terms, we seem to be encountering the real in a way which is perhaps unprecedented. Consider, for example, the ‘mad cow disease’ issue. What is revealed now is that the certainties which supported our way of life, which made our way of life possible – an integral part of that way of life was the consumption of meat – were not privileged and undeniable truths – as almost everyone was led to believe – but social constructions with limited duration and validity. In today’s risk society – here Ulrich Beck’s work is of prime importance – every certainty is increasingly being revealed as a social construction which can never neutralize and domesticate the real – with all its Lacanian connotations.

But what exactly do we mean when we say that the certainties supporting our way of life are nothing but social constructions? Obviously, the no-

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tion of construction does not entail any accusations of conscious deception. What it implies is something deeper and constitutive: humans cannot live their lives and develop a knowledge regarding their environment, natural and social, without representing it, without constructing it at the symbolic and the imaginary level; without attributing to it logical coherence and predictability. This 'logical' veil which covers over the heterogeneous domains of the real is a phenomenon so massive and systematic that it is impossible to conceive it as a conscious deception (Pecheux 1988: 638). In other words, humans are, in a certain sense, 'obliged' to construct their reality due to their constitutive inability of knowing and mastering the real, due to their attachment to language – humans inhabit language and are inhabited by language and thus have to approach the real indirectly and never in a definitive way.

The problem here is that in spite of this human deficiency – or rather because of it – all human action has to be supported by an illusory social construction purporting to master the impossible real – what is illusory, of course, is not that this is a social construction but the fact that it promises an absolute mastery of the real. Let me briefly clarify this statement. No doubt, humans are required to 'act' and indeed 'act' all the time, transforming their human and non-human environment, in order to follow the path of their desires and develop their civilization. All these actions presuppose some kind of a priori safety net, a net offered by the field of social construction (scientific assumptions, political calculations and institutions, personal plans, insurance policies, the welfare state etc.). What is usually neglected, however, is the relative and transitory character of all these constructions and of the safety they can provide. We demand from science and from our political system complete safety and this is something we are usually promised. What we are not offered is the knowledge – this would be a *savoir* and not a *connaissance* – that this supposed safety, even when it is consistent with the results of scientific research in a particular field, is never omnipotent, since science, as all discursive constructions, is not guaranteed a privileged direct access to the deep essence of things. This was clearly the dominant modern view, a view which accepted that scientists – especially natural scientists – were in a privileged position to arrive at safe, 'objective' descriptions of nature – of the deep 'essence' of nature – and thus to eliminate any uncertainty and risk entailed in human action. Contemporary epistemology and history of science clearly undermine these assumptions. In other words, what is emerging today is the dislocation of scientific objectivism and essentialism. Certainty is not the same as it was.

Certainty and modernity: a constitutive tension?

But surely this is not something new within our modern context. In fact, modernity is primarily associated with the dislocation of certainty, of the certainties characterizing pre-modern societies. With modernity, the unexpected and doubt – elements which were foreclosed by traditional forms of reason – resurface in the horizon and are inscribed, perhaps for the first time with such force, in scientific and philosophical discourse and political imagination. Descartes' example is revealing since his whole enterprise is based on the recognition of the constitutive nature of doubt. But this position is not eliminating the traumatic character of uncertainty. It was understandable for people who were used to seek the support for their way of life in absolute certainties to continue to need them within the modern universe of meaning. This is why modern science 'reoccupied' the field of pre-modern certainties. One should not forget that even in Descartes's argument the constitutivity of doubt is acknowledged only to be eliminated, in a second move, by the emergence of absolute certainty. Thus, the recognition of doubt causes new anti-modern outbreaks that attempt to eliminate doubt anew and create new certainties that would put an end to the continuous questioning modernity entails in its critical dimension (Beck 1996a: 183).

Simply put, although modern science is founded on the critique of pre-modern certainties, of 'objective' reason in Horkheimer's vocabulary, it did not manage to 'abandon the idea of a harmony between thought and the world, but just replaced the medieval idea that this harmony was preordained with the notion that thought and world could be brought into harmony with the use of a »neutral« and »objective« scientific discourse'. The aim is, in both cases, to eliminate the distance between the real – what is impossible to represent – and reality – the field of imaginary and symbolic representation; to articulate privileged representations of the world with a universal validity independent of any social, cultural or discursive context (Szerszynski 1996: 107-108). Thus, modernity identified itself with the emergence of new absolute certainties in the place of the dislocated pre-modern ones. The problem here is that seeking final and objective answers and failing to recognize that every answer of this kind is finite, articulated within a particular historical and social context, signals a return to the pre-modern world (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982: 30). Negating its own founding moment, the moment of doubt and critique, Enlightenment, becomes trapped in the pre-modern urge to master the totality of the real, to reach absolute certainty. This is the project of a royal science:

The project of a knowledge that would unify this multiplicity of »things to be known« into a homogeneous representable structure, the idea of a possible *science of the structure* of the real, capable of making it explicit, outside of any false semblance, and of assuring the control over this real without the risks of interpretation (therefore a scientific self-reading of the real, without faults or lack) – this project obviously corresponds to an urgency so vivid, so universally »human«, tied (knotted) so well (around the same stake of domination/resistance) to the interests of successive masters of this world, as well as to those of the wretched of the earth, that the phantasm of such an effective, manageable, and transmissible knowledge could not fail historically to use any means to make itself materialize.

The promise of a royal science as conceptually rigorous as mathematics, as concretely effective as material technologies, as omnipresent as philosophy and politics – how could humanity resist such a godsend? (Pecheux 1988: 640)

As Jacques Lacan has put it, through this fantasy modern society returns to a state of myth: 'How is one to return, if not on the basis of a peculiar (special) discourse, to a prediscursive reality? That is the dream – the dream behind every conception (idea) of knowledge. But it is also what must be considered mythical. There's no such thing as a prediscursive reality. Every reality is founded and defined by a discourse' (Lacan 1998: 32).

The legitimacy of modernity

Given this whole context, modernity is revealed as a deeply ambiguous project. This ambiguity of modernity is directly related to the question of the so-called legitimacy of modernity. Our reference to the concept of re-occupation in the previous section of this text could serve as an introduction to this problematic. The basic issue here is reflected in the following question, 'Is modernity enough modern?' K. Lowith, in his seminal *Meaning in History*, written in 1949, presents an argument according to which modernity and the modern conception of history have inherited many of their features from Christian eschatology. For Lowith, for example, the modern conception of time and temporality is clearly Christian: 'even the articulation of all historical time into past, present and future reflects the temporal structure of the history of salvation. It is only because of our habit of thinking in terms of the Christian tradition that the formal division of all historical time into past, present and future times seems so entirely natural and self-evident' (Lowith 1949: 185). Besides this conception of temporality-

ty, the whole conception of history, the revelatory character of modern historical and emancipatory narratives, the ultimate goal of a reconciled society and the idea of progress itself are derived from Christian eschatology. One could continue this line of argumentation *ad infinitum*. In fact isn't the scholastic *veritas est adequatio rei et intellectus* the first symptom of modern representationalism and of the modern claim for a total representability of the world? (Yannaras 1988: 129). The modern world is in fact irreligious, but on the other hand, depends on Christianity from which it is emancipated (Lowith 1949: 201). However, one must not think that modernity is just a mere consequence of Christianity. The secularization thesis elaborated by Lowith does not imply that. What Lowith argues is that modern historical consciousness is Christian by derivation and not by consequence.

At the seventh German philosophy congress in 1962, Hans Blumenberg criticized Lowith's secularization category. Furthermore, in his book *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, he elaborated a new theory on how Christianity influenced the emergence of modernity (Blumenberg 1986). Trying to prove unintelligible the secularization thesis, he argues that the continuity characterizing Christianity and modernity is not a continuity of solutions, but a continuity of problems or questions. We are not faced with the transformation of something that was originally Christian but with a *reoccupation*, a process that is present in every historical age. In our case a reoccupation occurs when modern historical forms are led to answer questions belonging to a pre-modern period instead of abandoning them altogether. The English translator of Blumenberg's book argues in relation to this particular point:

Christianity, he (Blumenberg) says, through its claim to be able to account for the overall pattern of world history in terms of the poles of creation and eschatology, had put in place a new question, one that had been (as Lowith so forcefully insists) unknown to the Greeks: the question of the meaning and pattern of world history as a whole. When modern thinkers abandoned the Christian »answers« they still felt an obligation to answer the questions that went with them – to show that modern thought was equal to any challenge, as it were. It was this compulsion to »reoccupy« the »position« of the medieval Christian schema of creation and eschatology – rather than leave it empty, as a rationality that was aware of its own limits might have done – that led to the grandiose constructions of the philosophy of history. (Blumenberg 1986: xx-xxi)

As Ernesto Laclau has pointed out, modernity should be viewed as a result of the conflation of the notions of reason – an Ancient Greek concept – and the Christian notion of an eschatological representation of the

totality of the real (Laclau 1991: 56). Thus history and society are referred to a single ground of human rationality. This strategy however is not unproblematic. The problem is that modernity denotes a demand 'for external guarantee [a 'reoccupation' of a Christian ground for Blumenberg or a 're-appropriation' in Vattimo's vocabulary] inside a culture that has erased the ontological preconditions for them' (Connolly 1988:11). As mentioned above, the result of this play can only be an irreducible tension.

The political ontology of social construction

Today that these modern reoccupations are being slowly dislocated, certainty is reduced to a human construction. The main point here is the following: if, in the past, it was thought possible to acquire an objective representation or symbolization of reality, even of the deep essence of things, constructionism argues that the failure of all these attempts, of all these reoccupations, the historical and social relativity of human representations of reality, show that this reality is always the result of a process of social construction. What we accept as (objective) reality is nothing but a social construction with limited duration. Reality is always constructed at the level of meaning and discourse. Lacan, for example, although he is not the paradigmatic case of a constructionist theorist, suggests that social reality is not a stable referent, a depository of identity, but a semblance created by the play of symbolization and fantasmatic coherence. Reality is lacking and, at the same time, attempting to hide this lack through the symbolic and imaginary means at its disposal – this is, in fact, the aim of all modern reoccupations.

Although Lacan is not a traditional constructionist – and we will see why in a minute – his argument includes certain constructionist assumptions. For Lacan, reality is always discursively constructed. In his unpublished seminar on the *Crucial Problems for Psychoanalysis*, he points out that any reference to reality, to reality as an objective whole, should generate a certain mistrust (seminar of 24 February 1965); elsewhere he refers to the myth of reality. And, in *Encore*, he concludes: 'There isn't the slightest prediscursive reality, for the very fine reason that what constitutes a collectivity – what I called men, women, and children – means nothing *qua* prediscursive reality. Men, women, and children are but signifiers' (Lacan 1998: 33). Existence depends on linguistic representation; what cannot be articulated in language, strictly speaking, does not exist. In short, reality 'is upheld, woven through, constituted, by a tress of signifiers'; reality, in other words, 'implies the subject's

integration into a particular play of signifiers' (Lacan 1993: 249). It is the signifier that produces reality:

Day and night, man and woman, peace and war – I could enumerate more oppositions that don't emerge out of the real world but give it its framework, its axes, its structure, that organize it, that bring it about that there is in effect a reality for man, and that he can find his bearings therein. The notion of reality that we bring to bear in analysis presupposes this web, this mesh of signifiers. (Lacan 1993: 199)

Furthermore, this whole symbolic production of reality is always supported by a whole fantasy construction. The construction of reality, the illusion of the world as a well-structured whole, would not be possible without the intervention of this element of fantasy. In Lacan's view, 'everything we are allowed to approach by way of reality remains rooted in fantasy' (Lacan 1998: 95). As Jacques-Alain Miller has put it with a touch of exaggeration, 'reality is fantasy' (Miller 1995: 12).

Lacan's position, however, cannot be reduced to the standard argumentation of social constructionism. While standard constructionism remains trapped within the level of construction – since it does not take into account anything beyond this level – Lacan, on the contrary, centers the last part of his teaching around the concept of the real, of what is impossible to construct, of what escapes representation at the imaginary and the symbolic level. From a Lacanian point of view construction can make sense only against a background of real impossibility.

The field of social construction is the field in which the symbolization of this real is attempted. Chaitin is correct when asserting that 'symbolization has the creative power to produce cultural identities, but at a price, the cost of covering over the fundamental nothingness that forms its foundation ... it is culture, not nature, that abhors a vacuum, above all that of its own contingency' (Chaitin 1996: 4-5), of its ultimate inability to master the real, of the irreducible impossibility of symbolizing this real: 'there is a structural lack in the symbolic, which means that certain points of the real can't be symbolized in a definite manner. ... the unmitigated real provokes anxiety, and this in turn gives rise to never-ending, defensive, imaginary constructs' (Verhaeghe 1994: 60). Simply put, 'all human productions ['Society itself, culture, religion, science'] ... can be understood in the light of that structural failure of the symbolic in relationship to the real' (Verhaeghe 1994: 61).

What is most important, however, is that the problematic of the real introduces a certain political element to our discussion. When the excluded real resurfaces within the field of our constructions these constructions

can enter into a period of crisis revealing their ultimate political grounding; what is realized is that they were not privileged representations of the real but sedimented forms of a political institution. Every dislocation, every encounter with the real, signals the resurfacing of the political since dislocation can only be (partially) symbolized through a decision taken within the context of a hegemonic play. As soon as this decision is taken, as soon as we have a new (temporary) symbolization which hegemonizes the social, the political is again forgotten. In other words, social construction, the imaginary and symbolic sedimentation of the social, presupposes a certain repression of the constitutivity of the political. It entails an impossible attempt to erase the political ontology of the social. When we limit our scope within socially constructed reality we are attempting a certain domestication/spatialization of the political, we move our attention from the political *per se* (as the moment of the disruption and the undecidability governing the reconstruction of social objectivity and certainty) to the social (as the locus of this construction itself, of the sedimented forms of objectivity and certainty) (Laclau 1990: 35). This sedimentation of social reality requires a forgetting of origins, of the contingent force of dislocation which stands at its foundation; it requires the symbolic and fantasmatic reduction of the political as an encounter with the real. Let me further illustrate this point in relation to the particular status of modernity by returning to the Cartesian argument.

Descartes and the political

As I have pointed out earlier, it is doubt that, in Descartes' conception, functions as the point of departure in order to reach absolute and certain knowledge. In doubt Descartes finds the absolute certainty of existence. Let me briefly demonstrate how this certainty is produced. The first point of his argument is the affirmation of the uncertainty of the world. For Descartes supposes that our sense and our memory, in fact our own mind or a superficial deceiver are indeed deceiving us. 'What then shall be considered true? Perhaps only this, that there is nothing certain in the world' (Descartes 1968: 102). However, he does not stop here, as the sceptics and Montaigne did earlier (Sutcliffe in Descartes 1968: 18). He is going to transform this problem into the only basis for his argument. We know, by now, that we can doubt everything. But then we have to accept that we cannot doubt the fact that we can doubt. Thus, we now positively know that we can doubt. As a result, if doubt is an intellectual function, an act of thought, then we know positively that we are thinking. However, in order to be able to think, one

has first to exist. Hence, if I think therefore I am, I exist: 'I am, I exist, is necessarily true, every time I express it or conceive it in my mind' (Descartes 1968: 103).

In Descartes' argument we can easily distinguish two distinct moments: the moment of doubt and that of certainty. These two moments do not exist separately as the supposedly dual nature of the human world. On the contrary, the first moment, that of doubt and uncertainty, is affirmed only to be used as a foundation in order to elaborate its own negation, that is to say, absolute truth, objectivity and transparency; in order to found certainty. In this sense, the moment of doubt is considered as an object of thought only to be forgotten later, eliminated as it is by its own consequence. What is of prime interest here is that this mastery of the uncertainty of our world by absolute truth (individual thought) is not merely a matter of academic philosophical interest. I shall try to show that it is rather a political issue and thus I will try to articulate a certain political reading of Descartes which is directly relevant for our discussion up to now.

In fact, Descartes himself admits that his problem is not doubt itself. The problem is that we have to make decisions without being certain of their outcome and success – which links the Cartesian argument to the problematic developed in the opening statements of this text. In other words, there is a gap between 'the power' we 'have of knowing things' and the power of choice, or free will, that is to say between our 'understanding' and our 'will' (Descartes 1968:135). Man is free and freedom means that it is possible for him to misjudge, to make mistakes; it means that he is exposed to certain deficiencies. Descartes cannot stand this open, contingent, undecidable, deeply uncertain and political character of human action. He wants to eliminate it. He attempts to master the political (as an encounter with the real, as opening a non-algorithmic field of decision) by basing decision on a certain, undoubtful, absolute knowledge (although this move empties decision from every possible meaning in terms of human will). For Descartes, human will is more extensive than human understanding, but in order not to misuse free will, the knowledge of understanding must always precede the determination of the will (Descartes 1968:139). This royal knowledge of understanding is now possible due to his own argument: 'I have not only learnt today what I must avoid in order to escape error, but also what I must do in order to arrive at knowledge of the truth' (Descartes 1968:141).

To sum up, what is revealed in our reading of Descartes is the strategy through which scepticism – a reaction to the first signs of the 'Death of God' and the dislocation of traditional systems of meaning – gives its place to certainty; to the creation of a new foundation through rational methods. This

is what one could call the ideotypical modern strategy of reoccupation. Here the traces of the contingency of the emerging certainty are always blurred. The modern drama, however, is that these traces are persistently re-emerging, leading modernity to various crises and to a further proliferation of defensive rationalist strategies up to Habermasian rationalism. This is evident even in Descartes' own writings. Ironically the tragical and ambiguous nature of our brave new world, the constitutive lack around which it is always structured, is depicted in the last sentence of Descartes' *Meditations* where the most grandiose attempt towards total certainty seems to refute and contradict itself, in the following way:

But because the necessities of action often oblige us to make a decision before we have had the leisure to examine things so carefully, it must be admitted that the life of man is very often subject to error, in particular cases; and we must, in conclusion, recognize the infirmity and weakness of our nature. (Descartes 1968: 168-169)

This is the place from which a political deconstruction of the Cartesian argument could start, the place where the political dislocates certainty and construction is revealed as the limit of human knowledge.

Creating a political modernity

It seems that today we are moving closer to this last Cartesian statement than to the modern reoccupations of pre-modern certainties. Today's societies are faced with the return of uncertainty, with the resurfacing of the inability to master the real (Beck 1996a: 84). We are forced, so to speak, to acknowledge the ambiguity of our experience and to approach self-critically our abilities vis a vis controlling the real (Beck 1996a: 88). From a past characterized by the quest for scientific, ethical and social certainties we turn to a present where the possibility of reaching certainty itself is questioned. We might be witnessing the end of a type of rationality which is now proven untenable for our societies (Gulbenkian commission 1998: 61), the end of reoccupation in our vocabulary.

This creates the chance to return to the founding moment of modernity or to reconstruct it anew. Such a move entails recognizing the irreducible character of impossibility, the constitutivity of the real as expressed primarily in the failure of our discursive world and its continuous rearticulation through acts of identification (this is the form decision takes). It presupposes a reorientation of science and knowledge. Recognizing the constitutivity of the real does not mean that we stop symbolizing; it means that

we start trying to incorporate this recognition within the symbolic itself, in fact it means that since the symbolic entails lack as such we abstain from covering it over with fantasmatic constructs. The guiding principle in this kind of approach is to move beyond the fantasy of certainty towards a self-critical symbolic gesture acknowledging the contingent and transient character of every symbolic construct, acknowledging the political ontology of the social.

This can be the basis for a scientific discourse different from the reified science of standard modernity. In his text 'Science and Truth' (it is the opening lecture of his 1965-66 seminar on *The Object of Psychoanalysis*) Jacques Lacan stages a critique of modern science as it has been articulated up to now, that is to say as a discourse that identifies the knowledge it produces with the truth of the real. If the constitutive, non-reducible character of the real introduces a lack into human reality, to our scientific constructions of reality for example, science usually attempts to suture and eliminate this gap. Lacan, for his part, stresses the importance of that which puts in danger this self-fulfilling nature of scientific axioms: the importance of the real, of the element which is not developing according to what we think about it. In that sense, Lacan's science entails the recognition of the structural causality of the real as the element which interrupts the smooth flow of our fantasmatic and symbolic representations of reality. Within such a context, this real, the obstacle encountered by standard science, is not bypassed discretely but introduced within the theory which it can destabilize. Truth, as the encounter with the real, is 'encountered' face to face (Fink 1995: 140-141). It is in this sense that psychoanalysis can be described as a science of the impossible, a science that does not foreclose or repress the impossible real. For Lacan, what is involved in the structuration of the discourse of science is a certain *Verwerfung* of the Thing which is presupposed by the ideal of absolute knowledge, an ideal which 'as everybody knows ... was historically proved in the end to be a failure' (Lacan 1992: 131). In other words, we cannot be certain that definite knowledge is attainable. In fact, for Lacan, certainty is not something we should attribute to our knowledge of things. Certainty is a defining characteristic of psychosis. For Lacan, it constitutes its elementary phenomenon, the basis of delusional belief (Lacan 1993: 75).

Given this context, opening up our symbolic resources to uncertainty seems to be the only prudent move we have left. What we can know has to be expressed within the structure of language but this structure has to incorporate a recognition of its own limits. This is not a development which should cause unease; as Nancy has put it 'What will become of our world is something we cannot know, and we can no longer believe in being able to

predict or command it. But we can act in such a way that this world is a world able to open itself up to its own uncertainty as such ... Invention is always without a model and without warranty. But indeed that implies facing up to turmoil, anxiety, even disarray. Where certainties come apart, there too gathers the strength that no certainty can match' (Nancy in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997: 157-158).

These brief remarks on science and knowledge initiate a whole new understanding and structuration of the social. What could be some of the parameters of this new organization of the social in our late modern terrain? Beck's theory seems to be relevant in this respect. According to our reading of Beck's schema, contemporary societies are faced with the return of uncertainty, a return of the repressed without doubt, and the increasing inability of mastering the totality of the real. We are forced thus to recognize the ambiguity of our experience and to articulate a self-critical position towards our ability to master the real. It is now revealed that although repressing doubt and uncertainty can provide temporary safety of meaning, it is nevertheless a dangerous strategy, a strategy that depends on a fantasmatic illusion. This realization, contrary to any nihilistic reaction, can become the starting point for a new form of society which is emerging around us, together of course with the reactionary attempts to reinstate an aging modernity: 'Perhaps the decline of the lodestars of primary Enlightenment, the individual, identity, truth, reality, science, technology, and so on, is the prerequisite for the start of an alternative Enlightenment, one which does not fear doubt, but instead makes it the element of its life and survival' (Beck 1997a: 161). Beck argues that such an openness towards doubt can be learnt from Socrates, Montaigne, and others; it might be possible to add Lacan to this list.

Within this context, doubt, which threatens our false-certainties, can become the nodal point for another modernity that will respect the right to err: scepticism 'contrary to a widespread error, makes everything possible again: questions and dialogue of course, as well as faith, science, knowledge, criticism, morality, society, only differently ... things unsuspected and incongruous, with the tolerance based and rooted in the ultimate certainty of error' (Beck 1997a: 163). Doubts liberate; they make things possible. First of all the possibility of a new vision for society. An anti-utopian vision founded on the principle '*Dubio ergo sum*' (Beck 1997a: 162) more close to the subversive doubtfulness of Montaigne than to the deceptive scepticism of Descartes. Although Lacan thought that in Montaigne scepticism had not acquired the form of an ethic, he nevertheless pointed out that 'Montaigne is truly the one who has centered himself, not around scepticism but around

the living moment of the *aphanisis* of the subject. And it is in this that he is fruitful, that he is an eternal guide, who goes beyond whatever may be represented of the moment to be defined as a historical turning-point' (Lacan 1998: 223-4).

This is a standpoint which is both critical and self-critical: there is no foundation 'of such a scope and elasticity for a critical theory of society (which would then automatically be a self-critical) as doubt' (Beck 1996: 173). Doubt, the invigorating champagne of thinking, points to a new modernity 'more modern than the old, industrial modernity that we know, The latter after all, is based on certainty, on repelling and suppressing doubt' (Beck 1997a: 173). Beck asks us to fight for 'a modernity which is beginning to doubt itself, which, if things go well, will make doubt the measure and architect of its self-limitation and self-modification' (Beck 1997a: 163). He asks us, to use Celan's phrase to 'build on inconsistencies'. This will be a modernity instituting a new politics, a politics recognizing the uncertainty of the moment of the political. It will be a modernity recognizing the constitutivity of the real in the social. A truly political modernity (Beck 1997a: 5).

In fact, the elimination of uncertainty from our life on top of being impossible, is also undesirable. Only when there is uncertainty there is room for responsibility and ethics. Without uncertainty, in a totally certain world, humans would be reduced to predetermined automata. A world without uncertainty would be a world without freedom. Thus we are led again to the political dimension of our discussion. Uncertainty is not only an ethical but also a deeply political issue. The only thing that still remains certain is that we will continue to take decisions within an undecidable terrain, within a terrain of uncertainty; no support for these decisions can be found in constructing fantasmatic symbolizations/reoccupations of certainty. Once this is granted what is also opened is the question of the legitimization of these decisions. The fact that they can no longer be legitimized by recourse to an illusory certainty guaranteed by a supposed direct access to the real offers the opportunity to enhance the potential of modern democracy. The trust in the decision making process can only depend on the open character of this process.

This is then our closing statement: the revelation of the constructed character of every certainty, the recognition of the constitutive character of uncertainty in human experience, makes necessary the open political administration of this uncertainty, an administration through democratic procedures. What is thus emerging is the profile of a society which discusses the consequences of its decisions before these are taken by someone else (an 'omnipotent' scientist, technocrat or politician). In this form of civil socie-

ty decisions which were previously taken behind closed doors, through supposedly de-politicized 'objective' procedures, are politicized again (Grove-White 1997: 119). Since none can master a certainty permitting him to decide in a totally safe way on our behalf, it becomes more prudent to decide democratically. Although this way it seems as if we are assuming a higher risk, this is only an illusion: the risk is not different. The only difference is that it is assumed by all of us instead of being administered by 'someone else' (a supposedly full Other): we are all called to accept the responsibility for the political nature of human culture. In that sense, recognizing uncertainty becomes one of the most important democratic challenges of our age, a difficult task but a task that has to be assumed urgently.

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