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# Modern Hopes

## Individual Expectations in the Era of Unbounded Possibilities

I.

One might think that the philosophy of the late eighteenth century explored the possibilities of reason for all time and thereby completed the Enlightenment at least in thought. But it was Immanuel Kant who systematised these possibilities and summed up their essential aspects when he stated, "The whole interest of reason, speculative as well as practical, is centred in the three following questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope?" The first question, according to Kant, is "purely speculative", the second question is "purely practical", but the third question is "at once practical and theoretical, so that the practical forms a clue to the answer of the theoretical, and – in its highest form – speculative question. For all *hoping* has happiness for its object." And Kant clearly understood happiness to be the "satisfaction of all our desires".[1]

To be sure, Kant thus defined hope as a fundamental anthropological category. But by having its speculative dimension preceded by its practical dimension, he simultaneously linked it to experience in space and time. As a result, particularly in hope, the fundamental openness of the human relationship to the world expressed in all three questions has a specific form: Theoretical capability (*can*) imparts something infinite to knowledge; practical obligation (*ought*) imparts something finite to action; linking the theoretical to the practical, however, imparts to hope a specific, namely a finite, uncertainty. Corresponding to the latter is the freedom to do something (*may*), because it focuses expectation on specific possibilities. This makes the question of hoping so revealing. For here freedom to do something (*may)* stands between *can* und *ought* in a relatively open space that is at once certain and uncertain.

This is crucial for the meaning of speculation, for it is not limited by the practical, but guided by it. And unlike what happens in acting, speculation is preserved in hoping, but is channelled, focused on something certain and deflected from what is totally uncertain. Hope therefore always has something focussed about it. But it does not always aim for something tangible. For often it happens that it is focussed on something altogether abstract –

[1] Immanuel Kant [1781/1787], *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Marcus Weigelt (London et al., 2007), pp. 635ff.

recognition, esteem or success. In turn, that which is practical does not specify the actions of the hope, but rather orients them: while it admittedly reduces the openness of the situation to its real potentialities, it does not thus eliminate the fictional possibilities. But that is not all. For by defining it more closely, Kant embedded hope both historically and socially contrary to his own generally anthropological intentions. To be sure, "happiness" for him meant "the satisfaction of all our desires", but according to him it is precisely the totality of this expectation that thwarts all practical action if the "desires" do not correspond to the possibilities that are regarded as achievable in a particular period and society. That is why for Kant "happiness" could only be a reasonable orientation for action "as far as this happiness corresponds exactly with one's morality, that is, the worthiness to be happy … ." That means, however, that it was very much part of the moral horizon of its time.[2]

It is perhaps for this reason that the question as to what I "may" hope does not immediately provoke the obvious follow-up question: Who is it that gives me permission to hope for something – or to hope at all? For by orienting hope toward a "happiness" that corresponds to "morality", Kant's formulation does not refer to the commandments of a transcendent or immanent authority. But it also does not refer to the determinants of human nature, which certainly play a role here by setting the anthropological framework within which at least the concrete expectations can even make sense. Rather, it refers to a society's operational rules, which mark the horizon of possibility one belongs to oneself as a moral being. It is only these operational rules that synchronise the objective possibilities with the subjective capabilities that, as a person's "worthiness to be happy", comprise not only the physical but especially the moral capabilities of a human being. And, according to Kant, it is only if the synchronization of objective possibilities and subjective capabilities is successful that rational expectations can be distinguished from irrational ones that arise from pure speculation, which is not tied to morality, is ultimately unbridled and absolutely arbitrary, and which eventually vanishes in the infinite in any case.

"What may I hope?" is thus the more challenging of the three questions, for it means: What can I reasonably not only wish for, but also what can I expect to have a realistic chance of fulfilment? Hope thus stands in a triangle of realities, possibilities and capabilities. At the same time, however, it therefore also raises the question as to how much of what is reasonable to expect can be met with the kind of confidence that is more than a general reference to the future and also more than a fundamental, rather dispassion-

[2] Ibid., p. 639.

ate openness to possibility. This confidence is not a certainty, of course – and in the strict sense hope is virtually the opposite of certainty. For hope is a positive dimension of contingency. It is the affective occupation of the circumstance that things can also be different and that one's own life is not completely determined by alien forces – not by nature nor by providence, authority or social pressure. But on the other hand, it is exactly here that we find the emotional and sometimes even irrational factor that turns hope into a particular form of expectation. The question, "What may I hope?" ultimately also contains a latent subtext that beyond all promises and predictions, beyond all prognoses and probability calculations, beyond all demands and entitlements expresses a longing that is able to withstand every rational objection perhaps precisely because it is ultimately completely self-referential and therefore has something obstinate, anti-real, almost defiant about it. When all is said and done, every hope contains doubt fed by the fear that it might be an illusion. While longing may diminish this doubt, it cannot dispel it. That is why the question, "What may I hope?" is inevitably accompanied by the counter-question: How much disappointment am I personally willing to endure?

II.

In the late eighteenth century, the Enlightenment was admittedly completed not only in thought. The French Revolution at the same time marked the end of a historical process that not only provided a completely new answer to the political question of human coexistence, but changed European societies' entire relation to the world. Ultimately, the phenomenon described by Reinhart Koselleck as the "separation of the 'realm of experience' and 'horizon of expectation'" in the modern era did indeed have this total dimension. For since the seventeenth century "the difference between experience and expectation" had "steadily increased" and finally resulted in the fact that "expectations have moved further and further away from all experiences gained up to this point".[3] And as a result, the dissolution of the boundaries of expectation in the early modern era meant not only dissolution of their ties to prior experiences, but of the tie to experience in general. In the history of mentalities, that is the point of the process, signalling something that was subsequently to have great importance for the self-conception of the modern era as an epoch with its own special quality – namely, the gradual separation of thought from a relation to the past and the increasing

[3] Reinhart Koselleck, "'Erfahrungsraum' und 'Erwartungshorizont': Zwei historische Kategorien", in idem, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979), pp. 349–75, esp. p. 359.

orientation of action towards new, fictionally developed and therefore absolutely invented possibilities that were part of a limitless horizon of the future.

The future was now to be something that was incomparably different and above all something that was historically better than the past than that which was still present. Not least, this is what the concept of "future" itself stands for – even semantically, an expression of modernity. For this term no longer defines the future as the arrival of something predetermined, given transcendently and, until far into the Early Modern Age, embedded in Christian eschatology; rather, the concept of "future" defines what is to come as an open and above all inner-worldly temporal horizon in which the new is something discontinuous, tremendously new which cannot be derived from the past, and especially not from traditional beliefs.[4] Perhaps this is most effectively expressed in the Enlightenment principle that purports that from now on it is not the new that has to assert and legitimise itself in the face of received tradition, but rather, the other way round, the old bears the burden of proof of its right to exist in the face of the potential new. "It has almost become a rule", states Koselleck, "that all previous experience is not allowed to be an argument against the differentness of the future. The future will be different than the past, and better."[5]

This discontinuity of origins and future established a new temporal structure in which the open infinity of constant progress replaced the closed infinity of eschatology. At the same time, however, this discontinuity thus accounted for the fundamental uncertainty of the future. For as long as "the Christian doctrine of the Last Things set an immovable limit to the horizon of expectation (roughly speaking until the mid-seventeenth century)", notes Koselleck, "the future remained bound to the past". This did not change until a new, immanent horizon of expectation was opened up by the historico-philosophical construct that "was finally defined as progress".[6] Namely, progress was not focused "on a hereafter" but on an "active transformation of this world" by realising the fictionally developed possibilities, so that "now the expectations that stretched into the future became detached from what had been offered by all prior experiences". It was this that was historically unprecedented and impressively new at the beginning of the modern era: "The space of experience was henceforth no longer encompassed by the horizon of expectation; the boundaries of the space of experience and the horizon of expectation went separate ways."[7] And at the latest with this rev-

[4] Cf. Lucian Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), pp. 34ff.
[5] Koselleck 1979 (see note 3), p. 364.
[6] Ibid., pp. 361f.
[7] Ibid., pp. 363f.

olution, which marked a break not only from the Ancien Régime and feudal society, but from the entire past, experience and expectation were now diametrically opposed.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted the radical nature of this epochal watershed: "Since the object of the Revolution was not merely to change an old form of government but to abolish the entire social structure of pre-revolutionary France, it was obliged to declare war simultaneously on all established powers, to destroy all recognized prerogatives, to make short work of all traditions, and to institute new ways of living, new conventions. Thus one of its first acts was to rid men's minds of all those notions which had ensured their obedience to authority under the old regime. Hence it's so markedly anarchic tendencies."[8] But it was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel who emphasised the spiritual and metaphysical significance of the French Revolution. In the universalised political legal structure established by this revolution, that is, in the republican constitution and in the juridically codified declaration of human rights, he saw the structure of an historic transformation in which the world became feasible, and thinking, acting and hoping in this way undeniably became a matter of course. "The conception, the idea of Right", he declared, "asserted its authority *all at once*, and the old framework of injustice could offer no resistance to its onslaught. A constitution, therefore, was established in harmony with the conception of Right, and on this foundation all future legislation was to be based. Never since the sun had stood in the firmament and the planets revolved around him had it been perceived that man's existence centres in his head, i.e., in Thought, inspired by which he builds up the world of reality."[9]

In this interpretation of the French Revolution, in which fiction and construction are recorded as crucial factors of modernity, there is still a flash of the pathos of that "dizzying feeling that total realisation is possible", a feeling which was unleashed by the political, social and cultural break with the old order and which George Steiner described as "new vehemence and historicity of personal awareness". After all, "history had henceforth become everyone's milieu", with the irreversible effect that "the revolutionary and Napoleonic decades brought on an overwhelming immanence – a deep, emotionally stressed change in the quality of hope".[10] On the other hand, it did not matter that "the brightest hope was destroyed" after the revolution-

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[8] Alexis de Tocqueville [1856], *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1983), p. 8.

[9] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York, 1956), p. 447.

[10] George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 12ff

ary armies had become occupying troops, as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote:[11]

> Who will pretend to deny that his heart swelled high in his bosom,
> And that his freer breast with purer pulses was beating;
> When we beheld the new sun arise in his earliest splendor,
> When of the rights of men we heard, which to all should be common,
> Were of a righteous equality told, and inspiriting freedom?
> Every one hoped that then he should live his own life, and the fetters,
> Binding the various lands, appeared their hold to be loosing, –
> Fetters that had in the hand of sloth been held and self-seeking.
> Looked not the eyes of all nations, throughout that calamitous season,
> Towards the world's capital city, for so it had long been considered,
> And of that glorious title was now, more than ever, deserving?
> Were not the names of those men who first delivered the message,
> Names to compare with the highest that under the heavens are spoken?
> Did not, in every man, grow courage and spirit and language?

III.

Concentrated in these words is the pathos of modern revolutions, which do not aim at the restoration of ancient particular rights but at the enforcement of new universal freedoms. For the political upheavals at the end of the eighteenth century made it possible to see the sense of what had formerly been tarnished with something that would have been almost ludicrous, or at least presumptuous and downright suspect, namely, the hope "to live one's own self". It is the epitome of modern hope. For it includes all expectations of self-realization, which are associated not only with the idea of political emancipation but also with the idea of social progress. Contrary to a long tradition of its political interpretation, social progress from the perspective of this hope was ultimately not so much the establishment of welfare states where the fundamental conflict of wage labour and capital was relatively pacified. Rather, from the perspective of this hope, social progress was the emergence of a society that has universalised the unbounded horizon of possibility and made individual self-realization its normative basis. Here we can see the normalisation of the hope for individual self-realization by means of its universalization. In any case, however, 150 years after the French Revolution, in the second half of the twentieth century a normalised middle-class society became established whose universal form develops by way of social

[11] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [1798], *Hermann and Dorothea*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York, 1909) – Correction by the author: "sich selbst zu leben" – "to live his own self".

infrastructures of self-realization through upward mobility. It is characterised by social mobility and by the emergence of that will to becoming which is not an anthropological need, as is frequently believed, but the product of an organised "anticipatory socialization" that the fundamental openness of the horizon of possibility caused to be taken for granted in modern life, as David Riesman and Howard Roseborough have shown.

"Anticipatory socialization" is introduction to an open-ended way of life, which at the same time provides "the prospect … of a fairly uniform middle-majority life style".[12] It is the subjective condition for a social mobility whose objective condition creates the permeability of social structure that was realised after the end of the feudal system of estates, and in particular after the end of the bourgeois class system in the mass democratic status system that after the Second World War became the epitome of modern society. It was modelled on the American middle class of the 1950s, with all its material hopes and ideational conformities. Riesman and Roseborough describe this openness of the social position as the early preparation of the individual for a social role that does not even exist yet – neither as a professional role nor as the role of a consumer. For "what is striking about American life", they write, "is that people are prepared for roles their parents have not played, indeed, that no one has yet played: they are prepared, in terms of motivation and social skill (a large component of 'know-how'), for jobs not yet invented and for consumption of goods not yet on the market."[13] Thus "anticipatory socialization", as rational orientation, leads to a positive relationship to an open horizon of potential. And it presupposes that expectations are not directed towards definitive and permanent, but towards situational and temporary gratifications. That is what makes them so vibrant. Accordingly, it is no longer only work that is the medium of social integration, but, at least to the same degree, consumption. And in this sense, write the authors, possession of the "standard package" of goods and services (which indicates status, if not constituting it outright, and in which the fact that one belongs to a particular status group and thus to a particular social milieu manifests itself) has become the actual symbol of socialization based on open possibilities.[14] Admittedly, here the general objective is only ostensibly the possession of standardised goods and services. Rather, people hope for recognition of their social status as represented by the "standard package". For social status is generally in need of stabilization, because social

[12] David Riesman and Howard Roseborough [1955], "Careers and Consumer Behavior", in David Riesman, *Abundance for What?* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London, 1993), p. 114.

[13] Ibid., p. 117.

[14] Ibid., p. 115 et passim.

positions that result from social mobility always remain precarious and therefore are constantly in need of recognition.

Middle-class society is therefore an economised society not only because of the structural importance of consumption, but also because the life of the middle classes is organised by "investing in status work" and thus profoundly economically based. "Who belongs to the middle classes? Those who have enough to be able to make more out of it – and too little to need to do nothing", state Olaf Groh-Samberg, Steffen Mau and Uwe Schimank. While this constitutes an indissoluble pact with what amounts to an open future, this future is at the same time open in a risky sense, because it can become a positive future only thanks to skilful investment. Those who belong to the middle classes, write the authors in words remarkably close to Kant's, "must invest – and may hope to achieve successes by doing so".[15] Only, what are successes? "Success", said Karl Mannheim, as distinct from "achievement", is not "attainment in some specialised field", but rather "attainment in the social sphere" – in other words, recognition by others.[16] And when "investment status work" becomes crucial for how one lives, this results in the dominance of an "investment" rationality whose generalization not only means that people's understanding of themselves and of the world is economised, but also denies the individual autonomy that is at the centre of modern hope.

The modern hope "to live one's self" thus becomes a hope to make the right kind of investment within the horizon of available lifestyle concepts and criteria of recognition markets. But what the latter have in common is that they are all only partially determinate. And perhaps for that reason, "investment" rationality is the actual metaphysics of a society whose basis is upward mobility and whose functional structure is the contingency of status positions. Corresponding to this rationality is a type of subjectivity for which the optimisation, that is, the open-ended surpassing of any status that has been achieved, has become a habitual personality structure. That is why today the answer to the question, "What may I hope?" is set against an ethical context that, thanks to the structural pressure to optimise, inevitably leads to the universalization of competition – competition with others, competition with oneself, and above all a completely abstract competition of what is real with what is possible. This pressure gives rise to a permanent

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[15] Olaf Groh-Samberg, Steffen Mau and Uwe Schimank, "Investieren in den Status: Der voraussetzungsvolle Lebensführungsmodus der Mittelschichten", *Leviathan* 42 (2014), pp. 219–48, esp. pp. 223f.

[16] Karl Mannheim [1930], "Über das Wesen und die Bedeutung des wirtschaftlichen Erfolgsstrebens: Ein Beitrag zur Wirtschaftssoziologie", in idem, *Wissenssoziologie: Auswahl aus dem Werk* (Berlin/Neuwied, 1964), pp. 625–87, esp. p. 634.

will to become. For under these conditions, "to live one's self" means to constantly "reinvent oneself", to enhance, to surpass and to optimise endlessly.

IV.

Hans Blumenberg has pointed out that to a large extent it is "intransitive propositions on preservation that underlie the rationality of the modern era".[17] Propositions are "intransitive" when they have no direct object, that is, when they refer to open-ended processes and abstract behaviours that are not about fulfilling specific goals but about developing indefinite competencies. Perhaps the ultimate uncertainty of the "anticipatory" lifestyle is the social form of a self-concept that is profoundly intransitive because it knows neither concrete objects nor definitive self-images. And perhaps this ultimately unstable concept of the self is the general problem to which the response, for some time past, has been a new interpretation of the hope "to live one's self". For the abstract universality of uncertain optimization pressures increasingly confronts the concrete particularity of the various factors that all revolve around the concept of "identity". "Identity", as Michel Foucault observed, confronts the hegemonic availability of lifestyle options in an economised "normalising society". And the concept thus becomes the epitome of a resistance that are "a refusal these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence, which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is". It is a resistance that revolves precisely around the question that underlies all identity policies, individual as well as collective, and which Foucault pointedly worded as "Who are we?"[18]

This question aims at a transitive interpretation of modern hope. For it is focused on concrete being and not on abstract becoming. And against the hope of developing in a climate of openness to options, it formulates the – perhaps anti-modern – hope of committing oneself to a united world in which it is not expectation that determines what I can hope, but rather religious or secular experience – as it did in former times. This means that the concept of "identity" effectively becomes the guiding concept of a second expansion of modern hope in which it is not the fictionality of possibilities but the authenticity of reality that counts. After all, the hope "to live one's

[17] Hans Blumenberg, "Selbsterhaltung und Beharrung: Zur Konstitution der neuzeitlichen Rationalität", in Hans Ebeling, ed., *Subjektivität und Selbsterhaltung: Beiträge zur Diagnose der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main, 1976), pp. 144–207, esp. p. 200.

[18] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power, in idem, *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed., trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago, 1983), pp. 208–28, esp. p. 212.

self" is aimed not only at social becoming, but also at "rediscover[ing] what one is and all that one can be – beyond all oppression or alienation".[19] And beyond all humiliation, disrespect and insults – as we may complete this sentence by Foucault along with Ernst Bloch, whose *Principle of Hope* begins with the very question that Foucault identified as the central question of the resistance against the neo-liberal optimization society: "Who are we?"[20]

[19] Michel Foucault [1976], *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1980) p. 145.

[20] Ernst Bloch [1959], *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA, 1986), p. 3. On neo-liberal optimization, cf. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Politics*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, 2008), pp. 316ff.