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A Will to Know the Future?

Prognosis and Politics

Extended Abstract

When rulers, depending on their epoch, question oracles of their age, listen to the prophecies of soothsayers or have experts draw up forecasts, it is a manifestation of a problem already highlighted by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: politics is concerned with a changing world, subject to no fixed eternal laws. Instead of universal truths, there is for politicians only a *direction* to recognise at a time, and in place of rules that are known and can be correctly applied, political decisions require *sophrosyne*, a sense of orientation immanent in an action, a sense of measure and a criterion of adequateness as it were of itself (and according to Aristotle, *praxis* contains its goal “within itself”). Only when a decision is in tune with current world movements can the superlative¹ be achieved, and the rhetorical movement of political speech, which for the ancient Greeks served as the means and the medium of political action, is assigned, as part of its function of convincing and persuading, the task of effecting, conveying and demonstrating at every moment the inseparability of speech and action itself as the locus of the political.

The validity of a political action is therefore never separable from the person acting and from his rhetorical profile as a figure moving within a speech (the political rhetorician is the source and medium, as well as the object of movement in the argument typified in equal measure by rationality and passion). A glorious political decision does not only opt for the right thing; it is also presented by someone whose personality, such as it is, accords with the matter at hand and its

¹ In contrast to the creation of things, Aristotle sees no sufficient limit in political action and no corresponding value of a sufficient quality. Virtue in politics is rather outlined by the perspective of a limitless *enhancement*, so that the *agathon*, the good, shares something of the excessive nature of *aristeuein*, the act of excellence where a man presents himself as better/the best. Following Hannah Arendt, “the superlative” could therefore be more precisely translated as “the *virtuoso*”. This is a starting point for my reflections in the research project “The Virtuoso’s Stage” – cf. http://www.sfb-performativ.de/seiten/b12_vorhaben_engl.html .

dynamics, while the presentation is contained in a speech whose argumentative and suggestive movement, through the conventionality of rhetorical figures, produces the evidence of the unprecedented break from the predefined course of compulsory sameness which rallies people as free equals by the singularity of this present moment. This is the (not merely or primarily moral) purpose of *political integrity*: The various aspects of acting – doing, talking, deciding, personality, rhetoric, figura(tion) etc. – cannot be separated from each other when this constitutes genuine *political* action, which is why the “overriding value” of action is “rooted deep within itself and not easily detachable”.²

Viewed from today’s perspective, it would appear obvious to read the history of the relationship between politics and prognosis as a history of politicians’ entanglement in dependencies which destroy or damage the integrity of political action. When rulers kept engaging in efforts (and investing large amounts of money) to learn the future, it was always in one sense an attempt to replace the political dependencies binding the regime through other dependencies exterior to politics. Whether, like Hannah Arendt, one localises the origin of political power in the voluntary support of an actor through others, or in the route leading from Hobbes, to Carl Schmitt, to Agamben, in the supreme *potestas*, as a conditionally delayed act of force and unremittingly implicit pressure on the life of its subjects – political power hierarchies were and are always too unstable to hide the temptation of abolishing politics itself as the source of their instability. If it appears impossible as a ruler to rid oneself of all dependencies, it seems nevertheless to have appeared sufficiently possible to exchange political dependencies for putatively or actually less unpredictable ones. This is precisely what the ruler who acquires prophecies about the future is doing: he grants influence to someone with no political responsibility. And this recourse to a religious, metaphysical or scientific authority is frequently carried out as a deflection of those who should, or claim to, bear this responsibility together with him: from citizens, other members of the ruling class, ministers and government

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, 1095b.

officials, councillors and elected representatives, voters etc. The politician who is guided by predictions or forecasts lets a part of that future which should primarily result from his own decisions (and he banks nevertheless on this being the case) be represented by a logic that is not that of political decision, but rather either a religious/metaphysical or scientific *logos*.

Prediction or prognosis is not an element of that political advice Aristotle referred to when writing about *euboulia*, the good counsel that is part of political decision-making.³ And precisely this is involved in those current critical objections to the explosion of consultancy in and around our governments which bemoans the depoliticisation of politics: decision management in accordance with advisor knowledge prevents politicians from actually making political decisions. The PR management conceived and organised by advisors even stops them from coming forward with political statements – i.e. with statements that are at least committed to the political rhetoric of free decidability.⁴ The prognoses provided or employed by these advisors do actually prompt the suspicion that they are aimed at destroying the open “world of the changeable” that is accessible to decisions, to replace it by an anticipatory future, one that is only relevant in the form of the anticipated and whose relationship to the status quo of the last-determined

³ The figure of such an advisor is not an expert excluded from the scene of political action or someone from the exterior. Political consulting in the sense of *euboulia* consists in a self-advisory capacity, a dispute with myself or someone who finds himself *in the same position* with regard to the changeable situation with which we are confronted, knowing no more and no less than I. Aristotle also terms *euboulia* the “accuracy of the movement of thought” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142b). At issue here is not an imported extra knowledge; rather, the *performative disposition of self-counsel* is fundamental to the integrity of political action – and slightly different yet from the process of convincing and persuading others, self-counselling is part of the *attitude* of the speaker/actor; it gives his words the sign of a *readiness to acknowledge* the verdicts of others, lending them “polyphony” in the sense of an inner resonance in the readiness to *hear* the words of others, which prepares and specifies his own audibility. For more critical appraisals of the shifts from *euboulia* to the current profile of scientific political consultation (including an attempt to renew *euboulia* in the contemporary political scenario) cf. Claus Leggewie, *Deliberative Democracy. From political to societal consulting (and back)*, in: Falk, Svenja / Römmele, Andrea / Rehfeld, Dieter / Thunert, Martin (Hg.), *Handbuch Politikberatung* [Handbook of Political Consulting], Wiesbaden 2005, pp. 152-160.

⁴ This criticism can already be found in Habermas, Jürgen, *Extremely Scientific Politics and Public Opinion* (1964), in: *ibid.*, *Technology and Science as “ideology,”* Frankfurt a.M. 1969, pp. 120-145. A more recent polemic e.g. von Heuser, Hubertus / Hönigsberger, Herbert, *Beratungs-Bubble und Räte-Republik. Politikberatung am Scheideweg*, [Consultation Bubble and Soviet Republic. Political Consultation at the Crossroads], <http://www.nautilus-politikberatung.de/main/page.php?5> .

changes scarcely admits anything other than upward or downward deviations. For all the agility shown by governments when adapting to the accepted future through reforms of ongoing processes, real change through the political, a freedom to formulate decisions achievable in the world appears to be gradually becoming unthinkable in the prognostically informed routine of these reforms. Hence, there is something to be said for the diagnosis that since through the influence of prognosis on what politicians think, say and do the liberating force of the openness to the future in the decision has been suppressed and the decision degraded to a mere resolution, we actually live in a post-political era.

One could however also read the heterogeneity of political action and religious-metaphysical or scientific knowledge with respect to prediction in converse fashion: the politician gains nothing in becoming a prophet or scientist himself, because the techniques of the divinely-inspired verification and the methods of scientific perception cannot be directly applied to his areas of action and its transfer always conceals the danger that this mismatch is manifested as error and results in fatal political consequences. Hence, although the current German chancellor is grounded in the natural sciences (and conversely, an advisor type such as Bodo Hombach could become a minister under Gerhard Schröder), no ruler has so far studied the art or science of prediction to such an extent that he would become his own expert.⁵ And an analysis of the relationship between politics and prognosis should not only explore the entanglement of politics in something apolitical, but also the significance of this *outsourcing*: Those who make predictions should *not be the same* as those actually making the decisions. This externalisation can assume a political sense, provided that it indirectly gives the politician some of the scope for manoeuvre that is indispensable if his decision intends to remain an act of *will*. It could be claimed that the appearance of a

⁵ The professionalisation of politics which has led to the differentiation of a specific competency profile appears not to integrate this manner of expertise – perhaps the expertise of a professional politician even more effectively closes itself up against that of the forecaster than a free non-professional determination of political authority in the type of republic by soviets with rotation of officials would do.

prophet or scientific advisor distances the politician somewhat from the rule of the latent necessity, that the entrance of this third party to the sphere of power objectivises this distance, gives its objectivity a name or an image.

The practice of freedom of decision requires a particular and extremely difficult distancing from knowledge which must distinguish itself from mere ignorance without being able to counter-pose anything other than practice itself against the authority of instances of knowledge. It is a question of maintaining distance to the high-handedness of knowledge and its resulting claims to power, so as to prevent the determinism inherent (at least as a tendency) in all occidental forms of magical as well as scientific knowledge from taking possession of decision-making, reducing it to the mere execution of what is called for. The threat posed by determinism prompted a political thinker like Hannah Arendt to question the very competence of criteria of truth in politics because she wanted to protect the freedom of decision-making as a characteristic of action against contamination by questions of an apt representation of the empirical reality and its laws.⁶

Even if one does not subscribe to this rigid separation of politics and truth⁷, it can be observed from Jacques Rancière's work that it lies in the nature of politics since antiquity, i.e. since a *political theory* has been articulated, that there is a conflict of powers between an essentially rhetorical "movement art" of action which understands the ability to decide as a locus of human freedom (whatever meaning and status may be attributed to this freedom) and a science of the truth that attempts to establish itself as the basis of a rationality of what is right, claiming the necessity to decide as the locus of a problem that the actor cannot and should not to resolve through his own discretion, for whose correct treatment he rather requires an overriding, metapolitical, epistemological knowledge. (And as I would like to demonstrate in my lecture, this theoretically-grounded

⁶ Cf. "Politics and Truth" in Hannah Arendt, *Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft. Übungen im politischen Denken I* [Between Past and Future. Exercises in Political Thinking I], Munich 1994 (2nd edition), pp. 327-370.

⁷ Alain Badiou has insisted in opposition to Arendt that there is a *political* term of truth that does not simply imitate the scientific truth, whose significance lies not least of all in its opposition to the sciences' monopoly on truth. Cf. Alain Badiou, *Über Metapolitik* [On Metapolitics], Zurich/Berlin 2003.

knowledge recommends itself as knowledge about dynamics, imposing itself as it does on politics as the better knowledge with regard to certain prominent movements.) In principle, according to Rancière, since its beginnings with Plato and Aristotle, political theory has worked consciously or unconsciously towards abolishing politics as a domain of the *freedom* to decide and has been concerned with establishing itself as a zone for the *necessity* to decide, under the aegis of criteria that actually eliminate the democratic aspect of all that is political: the excessive, namely excessively current quality of speech in the *agora*, the constitutive luxury of the dispute, the occurrence of the unforeseen which may altogether change the political order and its distribution of voices in the clash of contradictory, irreconcilable views and wills.⁸

The strength and danger of political theory lie in equal measure in the fact that it abstracts from the present a philosopher shares with his fellow men. Instead of reflecting on a future for this present time (one that continues and rechannels its movements or one that breaks with it radically), it leapfrogs to a definition of politics as the realisation of a knowledge of the best rule and best order that remains consciously alien to the present. The train of thought contained in the canonical works of political theory mainly proceeds from an enumeration of various forms of government and political styles – in which the present politics is only listed as one option among others – to a description of one ideal model: a community that no longer needs politics because the truth has become a *nomos* within it; an ideal form of rule that eliminates the political dispute between antagonistic forces by reducing it to various interests and reconciling partial interests to a higher interest, the community's own will; or, once that no longer appeared promising in the “pluralistic” societies of the late 20th century, a plain parliamentarism that idealises the compromise itself as the essence of politics and consigns political dispute to “constructive dialogue”, to negotiation.

⁸ Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Das Unvernehmen. Politik und Philosophie* [Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy] Frankfurt a.M. 2002.

Within this field of tension between political practice and political theory, the figures of the oracle, the soothsayer, the forecaster can be viewed as instances of a simultaneously performatively and symbolically *involved distancing of knowledge from action*. Where they seek an expertise on the future, the political decision-makers become involved with a heterogeneous knowledge, labelled as “wisdom,” “vision” or “scientific finding” and differing thoroughly from the practical knowledge of politics. And yet they dispense with these advisors at the same time that figure of the theoretician who since Plato has claimed he is the true ruler. And perhaps it is the puzzling and doubtful element, which in every epoch was semanticised differently, but always appreciated, the precariousness of the identified truth’s application for the prediction of the future, that has again and again enabled this distancing from a foreign knowledge impinging on the freedom of decision. Viewed in this way, prophecy would be for politics not merely the guarantee of higher security for power, but *equally* (and this contradiction perhaps says something about politics as a paradoxical interconnection of freedom and power) as a source of errors and a witness to the fallibility of the personal and institutional instances of knowledge competing for power.

This would be the political punch line to the fact that even today – in fact, today more than ever – the wise, enlightened and scientifically-informed are encouraged to take on this impossible task: predicting the future. Having them deal with the future perhaps serves not least to prevent them doing something they could do much better and more successfully: to reconstruct the present from the past in such a way that the illusion of freedom, the illusion that there is a freedom *corresponding* to a decision, disintegrates before the very eyes of the rulers and the ruled.

Against the backdrop of this ambivalence in the relationship between political decision and a recognisable knowledge that corresponds to the available truth that includes the future, I would like in my contribution to explore a change or a caesura within this knowledge – a change in the manner in which people have

attempted or claimed to know the future which I believe is directly linked to a change in the manner in how there is (or could be) a *will* to know the future. What is at issue is the correlation between those forces in occidental cultures that have pursued research and developed processes which give orientation in the problem of the future, and the political will: What was the influence exerted by the organisational forms of knowledge about the circumstances of time and their techniques of reviewing and previewing on the constitution, the profile and the modes of exercising political will? And which influence could conversely be exerted by a certain political will on the formation and the respective manifestation of the “will to know”?

I would like to focus these big questions into one a little smaller: where, when and how do transitions take place from the magical practice of prediction, the oracle’s verdicts, prophecies, soothsaying and auguries, to that what we now call prognosis and what belongs to today’s politics in most of our so-called parliamentary democracies? I am neither concerned with the history of the term “prognosis” nor with a “cultural history of prediction” that would define a threshold of eras between an antique or mediaeval era of prophecy and a modern era of prognosis. My intention is rather to pose the question as a *simultaneously epistemological and political* one within the “history of thought systems” as Michel Foucault outlined it: What are the conditions for transitions from one type of prophecy that enlighten rulers about an uncertain and thus threatening future, to arm them against future attacks, to beat off opponents in good time, plan campaigns or organise defensive actions and meet effective measures against rebellions – to another type of prediction that perhaps represent the most important instrument within a *political economy*: a systemless system of constant self-investigation and self-assessment of a present extending into the future that sees itself as a status quo of an ongoing process of growth and optimisation? I will attempt to analyse a few of these transitions, and I will speak of transitions in the plural, because it seems to me that the renewals, postponements and re-evaluations that lead from prophecy to prognosis have occurred *repeatedly* and are still doing so.

As far I can predict at the present time, one thesis offered by my lecture will be that the caesura, the radical break *between* prophecy and prognosis, is still awaiting our own present. But who knows.